

Contents

Title Page

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Extract from *Unseen*

Extract from *Criminal*

Copyright

Busted

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Will Trent let out a long, mournful sigh as he stared at the blinking red light on the frozen Coke machine. There was no telling how long the Coke and ice had to cycle before a delicious frozen beverage came out. Will had an app on his phone that showed the location of every Icee machine in Georgia. This was the twenty-first century. It was bad enough they weren't flying around in jetpacks. Was it too much to expect a real-time update on a frozen Coke?

He glanced around the Lil' Dixie Gas-n-Go, taking in the neon signs that advertised live bait, ammo, and lottery tickets. Will was in Forest Park, less than half an hour's drive from downtown Atlanta, but the gas station had all the makings of a country store. Day-old biscuits baked under a heat lamp. A gallon jar of pickled pigs' feet sat next to the cash register. A plexiglass display for smokeless tobacco filled an entire wall. Except for the frozen Coke, Will was hard-pressed to come up with a reason anybody would want to be here.

He wasn't just thinking about the store. Forest Park was a dog of a city, sitting on the edge of Clayton County, which was arguably one of the worst counties in the state. The usual suspects had led to its demise – bad real estate deals, corrupt county officials, the shuttering of a major military base – but the final nail in the coffin had been the 1996 Olympics. In the name of progress, Atlanta had razed all of its government housing projects and sent the occupants south so that international guests and athletes wouldn't have to gaze upon the poor and disenfranchised.

After the Games were gone, no one was asked to return. For Atlanta, out of sight meant out of mind or, in the case of the thousands who were forcibly relocated, out of luck. Very little monies or resources were spent on helping them settle. Gang members set up shop. Crime rates soared. Neighborhoods were decimated as anyone who could afford to fled to other counties. The pillaging didn't stop with the usual bad guys. In the intervening years, rampant corruption and mismanagement had touched just

about every governing body. The Clayton County school system had lost its national accreditation. The county chief of police was being investigated by the state for theft of grant money. A commissioner had been billed by one local paper as “often investigated, never indicted.” The county’s finance office and archives had been served with enough search warrants to wallpaper the governor’s mansion.

And none of that accounted for the glaring injustice of the slow-moving wheels in the Lil’ Dixie frozen Coke machine.

Will took his cell phone out of his pocket and checked the time. He’d wasted six minutes waiting for the machine to cycle. He already knew he was an idiot for waiting so long. The question was, would he be a bigger idiot if he cut his losses and left?

Five more minutes.

He tucked the phone back into his pocket and walked up the aisle. The girl behind the register eyed him suspiciously. She had good reason to. Will usually wore a three-piece suit to work, an outfit he’d been told made him look more like an undertaker than an agent with the Georgia Bureau of Investigation, which he’d been for over a decade. Today was his first day undercover for a new assignment. He was wearing shitkicker boots, torn jeans, and a flannel shirt that was too tight across his shoulders. The only thing missing from his con attire was a tattoo, but there were some sacrifices Will was not willing to make.

He had always liked working undercover, liked the idea of being a different person, walking around in a different skin. Of course, that was before he’d met Sara Linton. The prospect of being someone else had lost some of its appeal now that he had a steady girlfriend. Will liked exactly who he was right now. He liked the man he saw reflected in Sara’s eyes. He especially liked the way she’d woken him up with her mouth this morning, which was exactly how Will wanted to wake up every day for the rest of his life.

The bell over the door clanged. A fireplug of a cop sauntered into the store, his eyes scanning back and forth like a gun turret. The man’s leather belt creaked as he walked, his gun, mace, baton, and handcuffs beating their own symphony against his body. His black shoes snicked on the floor. His dark blue uniform with its yellow stripe appeared to be from the bumblebee line of law enforcement attire. The pants were ironed into a sharp crease. The Forest Park Police Department badge on his chest was shined to a mirror polish.

Will knew the guy's type without even thinking about it – the way he swiveled his sunglasses around to the back of his head, the bulging arms that were more fat than muscle, the air of Axe body wash that chewed into the oxygen around him. He was the type of hard-ass who would play fair so long as you understood that he was in charge. The minute he thought otherwise, you'd hear the hounds of hell barking in your ears.

Today must've been a good day. The cop winked at the girl behind the counter as he grabbed the key to the bathroom. He'd clocked Will the minute he'd walked through the door, but he pretended like he hadn't right up until it was time to pass by. Will narrowed his eyes, mindful that he was undercover. His fake identity had him as a con named Bill Black, and there wasn't a con on earth who didn't hate the sight of a cop. If not for a sense of decorum, Will would've spit on the floor.

The cop looked up at Will, his neck cracking because Will had a good ten inches on him. "That your bike out there?"

Will didn't answer. The Indian Chief Dark Horse came courtesy of the Fulton County impound lot. The motorcycle's warbonnet headaddress tank design and black matte spoke wheels had cost a high-rolling drug dealer a chunk of change. It gave Will some pleasure knowing the high roller was currently serving ten to fifteen in Valdosta State Prison while his shit-hot bike was parked in front of the Lil' Dixie. The license plate was registered to Bill Black. The cop would've pulled up Black's sheet on his computer before he entered the store. Assault. Battery. Attempted robbery. Suspected in a string of crimes from here to Kentucky. And perhaps most heinous of all – speeding in a school zone.

The cop asked, "I need to worry about you, hoss?"

Will guessed Bill Black wouldn't have much to say to a cop. He would also know it was perfectly legal to remain silent. Instead of answering, Will looked at the magazines on the rack. Porn, mostly, and *People* magazine, which was basically porn for women.

"All right," the cop said. "If that's how you wanna play it." He glared another second or two before heading off toward the bathroom.

Will checked the girl at the counter again. She had seen the exchange and was looking at him differently now. Very early on in his life, Will had learned that there was a certain kind of woman who was attracted to trouble. He guessed the girl behind the

counter was this kind of woman. At least it seemed like it when she took out her lip gloss and seductively traced the wand around her wet lips.

Which made Will think of Sara this morning.

Which made him think he needed something to distract himself.

He made sure the Icee machine's light was still flashing, then randomly picked up one of the magazines. The paper was thin, and he realized he'd chosen *Busted*, a weekly newspaper that compiled all the mugshots taken by the local police. It was like a celebration of incarceration, with centerfolds, ads for bail bondsmen, and explanations for the alphabet of charges: DUI, PUI, PMDD, DGCSA.

Obviously, some arrestees had cottoned to the fact that their mugshots might be viewed by a wider audience. The centerfold for this particular issue was a female meth freak with her head thrown back so the camera could better capture her toothless grin. Underneath her face was a smattering of capital letters that Will didn't bother to decipher.

He returned the paper to the rack and headed toward the back of the store. The flashing red light was flashing at a slower pace. Will wondered if that meant the mixture was close to ready, or if he was trapped in some sort of Icee-fugue state where time had ceased to matter.

He thought to ask the girl, but she had stopped making googly eyes at him and was staring blankly at the wall. Her body was draped across the counter in a visual display of boredom. Will guessed she hadn't noticed that a truck had pulled up outside. It was an older model Chevy with nothing but Bondo and a spotty primer coat holding it together – the kind you saw in the movies that indicated the guy who drove it was either an old-timer who smoked a pipe or a young man who had resisted the call of the city and was choosing to work the land.

The truck idled. Smoke curled from its tailpipe. There was a man behind the wheel, but he didn't get out.

The bathroom door slammed open. Will had to breathe through his mouth. Axe body wash was no longer the predominant odor. The cop tossed the bathroom key up and down in his hand, calling to the girl, "You might not wanna go in there for a few." He was smiling when he looked at Will, but there was a warning in his eyes. Will held contact for a few seconds longer than necessary before turning back to the Icee machine.

The red light was off.

Will tried to pretend that his heart hadn't just skipped a beat. The idling truck was a distant memory; let the cop deal with it. Will was a con named Bill Black who liked to partake of the occasional frozen drink.

He grabbed a cup and snapped on a plastic dome. He lined up the hole in the dome with the spout for the machine. He wrapped his fingers around the handle, pausing a split second before pulling back and allowing the rush of frozen Coke to fill the cup.

And then something odd happened.

The cup was on the floor. The plastic dome topped a pile of frozen Coke like something out of a Stephen King novel. Will's hand was empty, but his fingers were still curved like he was gripping the cup. His other hand held open the nozzle. A slush pile slopped over the tip of his boot. There was a high-pitched whine, then a sharp pain like a needle piercing his eardrum.

His brain quickly went into rewind. Somewhere in his visual cortex, Will saw the cup lift off the floor, the frozen drink slush back in, the dome snap back onto the top. At the end, Will was holding the cup again, about to pull back on the handle.

That was when he'd first heard the gunshot. It was an explosion that shook the air like a rocket taking off.

Two seconds had passed, tops, but it felt like minutes.

Will's knee went to the floor – automatic, just like he'd been trained. *Get yourself low and little*. His hand went to his side, but of course his gun wasn't there. He was undercover. Cons weren't allowed to carry weapons, and Bill Black was a law-abiding con.

"Give me the fucking money!" a man screamed. His voice trilled up, like he was more scared than anybody else. "Hurry!"

Cautiously, Will peered around the row of magazines. The girl was shoving money into a plastic bag as quickly as she could. The offending weapon was pointed at her head. Shotgun. Winchester Model 24, double-barrel, side-by-side boxlock action. The man holding it was African American, maybe forty, forty-five years old, roughly five-eight and 180 pounds. He had a bushy porn mustache and a spotty goatee. He looked straggly, more homeless guy than holdup man. He was wearing dirty jeans and a matching denim jacket with dark stains on the sleeves. Dreadlocks stuck out from underneath a John Deere baseball cap.

Will took out his cell phone. He dialed 911.

"All of it!" the gunman screamed. The tip of the shotgun wavered from his shaking hands. "Hurry!"

Will pressed the cell phone to his ear, willing the operator to pick up. He looked for the cop. The man was on the floor. His Glock was inches from his fingers. He'd obviously tried to draw down on the robber and gotten a bullet for his effort. Blood pooled around him. His sunglasses had skidded across the floor. One of the lenses was broken in two. The gunman's heel crunched on the plastic as he stepped back. Sixth sense. He was wondering who else was in the store.

Will heard a loud click in his ear. The emergency operator sounded as bored as they usually did. "Nine-one-one. What's your —"

"Who's there?" the gunman yelled. He turned toward the back of the store, took one step, then another. "Who is it?"

Will put the cell phone on the floor as he duck-walked toward the next aisle.

"Who are you?" There was something different about the gunman's tone. Will looked up, his eyes finding the fish-eye mirror in the corner. He could see the gunman, which meant the gunman could see him.

Slowly, Will raised his hands. He tried to sound like a con. "I got no beef with you, man."

"I need to worry about you?"

The words were eerily similar to the cop's.

"No." Will glanced down at his phone, hoping like hell the 911 operator was listening. "Lookit, bro, we're cool. You ain't the first guy to rob a gas station."

The shotgun was raised, but the man didn't come closer.

Will pressed his luck. "Don't worry about me. Just take the money, jump back on 75 and get the hell outta here." Will had to swallow so he could keep talking. "Police ask me, I'll tell them you took the back roads."

There was a moment that felt a lot like contemplation. Will didn't realize he'd been holding his breath until he saw the gunman shake his head once, then turn back to the girl at the cash register.

Apparently, the gunman wasn't pleased with her lack of progress. "I said hurry, you stupid bitch!"

"I'm doin' it!" she yelled back. Will chanced another look. She stuffed one last handful of cash into the bag before shoving it

toward the robber. "That's it! That's all I got!"

The gunman snatched the bag out of the girl's hand. Relief seemed to flood his body. His teeth showed under the mustache. He gave a rebel yell as he raised the shotgun and pulled back on the trigger, which was a very dramatic way to make an exit, but a stupid thing to do if you wanted to get away.

Double-barrel shotgun. Two triggers. Two shots. Unless he broke the action and reloaded, the gunman might as well be holding a hollow metal stick.

Will stood up.

"Jesus Christ!" the gunman screamed, obviously startled.

Will started walking toward him.

"What are you doing?"

Will told the girl, "Go out the back."

"I thought we were cool!" the man yelled, his voice cracking. "Stop right there!"

Will didn't stop.

The man leveled the shotgun from his waist. "I'll shoot you."

Will kept walking. The girl was frozen in place, so he made his voice harder. "Move."

She finally did as she was told, bolting for the back door.

"Stop!" The man shook the gun at Will. "I mean it! Stop!"

Will still didn't stop.

The gunman pulled on the first trigger, then the second one. The empty clicks reverberated through the store. "Shit!"

Will grabbed the shotgun. The hot barrels singed his skin. He jammed the butt of the gun into the man's chest so hard that he could feel the sternum give. The man stumbled back against the plate glass window. His arms flew out. His eyes went wide. There was a clinking sound. The glass started to crack, white lines shooting out like bolts of lightning.

The man's forehead broke out in blood – at least that's what it seemed like. Will felt the air stir as a bullet whistled past him. Bone and gray matter spattered his face, the front of his shirt. The gunman had been shot from behind. The bullet went through the glass, through his head, and almost straight into Will.

Instinct.

Will's knee hit the floor. His hands went over his head like they could magically stop a bullet.

The idling Chevy.

The get-away vehicle.

The driver stood outside the open door to the truck. He started shooting wildly into the store. Bullets zinged off the floor, ricocheted into the snack displays.

Will reached for the Glock. The cop's hand snaked out and grabbed it before Will could. Even flat on his back, he wouldn't give up his weapon. Another bullet whizzed past Will's shoulder. There was no time for reasoning. Since Will couldn't grab the Glock, he grabbed the bag of cash. He ran down the aisle, hiding behind the end cap as linoleum tiles splintered behind him.

Silence descended. Like time, sound was defying the laws of science.

Slowly, Will was able to pick out some familiar noises. The idling engine of the Chevy was like a broom sweeping up asphalt. The heavy, snare-drum pounding was his heart trying to break out of his chest. The rat-tat-tat was the breath panting out of his mouth. Will looked down at the bag of cash in his hands like it could explain to Will why he'd grabbed it. And then for no reason at all, he looked back up at the Icee machine.

The red light was flashing again.

Motherfucker.

Glass crunched. The driver was inside the store. Will's eyes automatically locked onto the fish-eye mirror. He could see the second shooter, so the second shooter could also see him.

Everybody wanted to think they were Rambo in a situation like this, but the fact was the only thing going through your mind was that you were probably going to die. Will debated how to go out. Should he throw the bag of cash at the man, hoping that's all he wanted? Should he just stand up and take the bullet to his chest on the off chance that all the major arteries would be missed? Should he just stay curled into a ball and piss himself like every bone in his body was telling him to do?

One single gunshot rang out. Will stood up. This wasn't instinct or training, but just blind hope. The shot was either the cop shooting the driver or the driver shooting the cop. It didn't really matter. This was Will's only chance. He lunged into a full run. He kept his body low like a linebacker going for a tackle. The driver was either distracted or shocked or just plain stupid, because instead of shooting Will in the face, he stood there with his mouth open in surprise until Will's shoulder slammed into his gut.

The force pounded them both into the floor. Will tried to grab onto the man, but he was wiry, and he bucked like a horse. Will got in a few punches before the driver's elbow swung around like a rotary blade. Will's nose exploded. That was the only way to describe it. The pain was debilitating. He saw literal stars. He was too stunned to do anything but bleed, which gave the driver the opportunity to push himself up from the floor. Will struggled to do the same. It was no use. He shook his head like a dog. Horked up a wad of blood from the back of his throat.

The driver ran toward the door. There was a wail of sirens in the distance. Will could see the guy heading for his truck. After a few false starts, Will ran after him. His boots cracked against broken glass. He jumped over the cop's body. The asshole was still holding tight to his Glock. Will didn't bother with the gun. The Chevy was barreling toward the road, which was less than fifty yards from the interstate.

Will jumped on his bike. He kicked the starter and revved the engine. The bike bucked from the sudden surge of power, but Will held on tight, opening the throttle wide as he shot out into the road.

He nearly rammed straight into a Mercedes. Morning rush hour was out in force, cars streaming into the various fast-food restaurants lining the exit. Will darted in and out between cars, narrowing his eyes to keep out the bugs and dirt spitting up from the road. He heard sirens behind him, but knew that his bike was their best chance to keep up with the Chevy. Ahead, the man drove with one foot on the brake, one on the gas. He swung the truck like a slingshot in and out of traffic, blindly trusting that everyone else would get out of his way.

The Chevy ran the first light it came to, causing an eighteen-wheeler to jackknife across the median. Will cringed as the rig swept up two SUVs. Just by chance, he looked down to find the handlebar of his bike inches away from a car's sideview mirror. Will jerked his hand away seconds before the grip hit the mirror. The mirror flipped back. He fought to correct the turn, praying he hadn't saved his fingers only to lay down eight miles of skin on blacktop.

The Indian righted, staying true to the yellow line in the center of the road. Will gunned the engine. He clenched his ass cheeks as he slid between two cars going in the opposite direction. The Chevy was up ahead. A Forest Park Police cruiser was on its tail now. Lights and sirens were blaring. Cars were starting to pull over, but

not all of them. Will saw a man holding up his iPhone with one hand as he attempted to drive with the other.

The Chevy approached the bridge over the interstate. The driver was going straight as an arrow, but he made a split second decision and swerved toward the on-ramp to I-75. The police cruiser missed the turn by about a foot, popping against the bridge railing so hard that the trunk and hood flew open. Will almost did the same. He turned at such a steep angle that he felt the asphalt rub the seam on the side of his jeans.

He righted himself, then swerved sharply to avoid rear-ending a parked BMW. Then swerved again to avoid another car. Will gripped the brake as hard as he could. The bike went into a spin, almost getting away from him before shuttering to a stop.

The on-ramp was packed with vehicles. Again, the Chevy weaved back and forth through traffic. The driver's luck ran out smack in the middle of the ramp. The Chevy clipped the front end of a Prius. The impact was like two rubber balls colliding. The Prius sucked into an SUV. The Chevy bounced sideways, sliding at a right angle across the asphalt.

Will stood from the bike.

The on-ramp started at the top of a steep hill. Instead of a guardrail lining the left side, there were a bunch of orange barrels indicating where a guardrail would eventually be placed. The on-ramp needed it. The median was a sharp drop down, maybe thirty feet of nothing but sky between the top of the ramp and the highway. The Chevy driver's hands worked furiously to avoid the obvious, but there was no stopping gravity. The truck knocked out a row of orange barrels as it plunged toward the interstate.

Will felt his jaw drop.

Instead of fighting the fall, the driver steered into it. The truck accelerated. The wheels caught air. The landing wasn't pretty. The truck bounced and skipped across four lanes of interstate, hit the median divider, then skidded back across the same four lanes. Cars careened around like pinballs. The driver's arms flew wide as his head slammed into the roof, then snapped down, then slammed into the roof again.

For just a moment, it looked like the Chevy might tip over, but through some act of physics Will would never understand, the truck stayed upright. The driver didn't argue with luck. The truck's engine screeched as it lurched down the interstate. The tires had popped

from the impact. The rubber flew loose like Silly String. The Chevy was on nothing but rims now. Sparks flew up from the road.

Still, he was getting away.

Will sat down on the bike. He pulled back on the throttle again, gunning the engine. The on-ramp was bottlenecked. Some of drivers had gotten out of their cars to watch the melee. Most of them had phones in their hands, like nothing was real for them unless they captured it on video.

Will had no choice but to follow the truck's path down the median. He tried to control the descent, but a large rock sent the bike airborne. He ended up making roughly the same jump to the interstate as the Chevy. It was easier on the bike, and certainly more graceful, but only a last-minute straightening of his knees kept Will's testicles from sneezing out of his nose.

Up ahead, the Chevy was slowing. The rims had melted down to the axles. Finally, the driver was forced to stop in the middle of the interstate. No one had been speeding, but there were still some collisions as the cars around him came to a stop. In the end, the Chevy looked like the center of a Matchbox display.

Will was around a hundred yards away, the length of a football field, but he clearly saw the driver get out of the truck. A blue bandanna was wrapped around the lower half of the man's face. A gun was in his hand. He stumbled as his leg started to give out from under him. Blood soaked his shirt and pants. He limped across the interstate, the gun pointed straight out in front of him as he approached a yellow Mini Cooper. Will saw the door open. A woman's leg appeared, her high-heeled shoe touching the pavement.

The man waved his gun, indicating she should slide over to the passenger's seat.

Hostage.

Will revved the bike. He didn't let himself think about what he was doing, because what he was doing was probably the most idiotic thing he'd ever done in his life.

He steered straight toward the driver, the muscles in his arm and shoulders screaming from pulling back on the throttle. The driver turned, but it was too late. By the time he swung around to point the gun at Will, Will was off the bike and the bike was heading straight toward the driver.

Will didn't slide across the asphalt – there was a limit to his

stupidity. What he did was try to hop off. The shift in weight lifted the motorcycle's front wheel up into the air. Instead of flipping back on itself, it roared across the tarmac on its back tire.

Oddly, Will recalled a show he'd seen on Animal Planet the week before. Bear attacks. Tense stuff. During one of the reenactments, a giant black bear had reared up, mouth open, claws up, as the victim just stood there waiting to get mauled.

And so it was with the driver. He stood there motionless with his gun out in front of him. The screaming Indian seemed to leap at him. Metal met metal, then skin, then bone. Blood sprayed. Hair was wrenched from the scalp.

It really was a lot like the bear attack.

Will fared only slightly better. His body didn't just stop because he was no longer on the bike. The momentum wasn't entirely unexpected. As he jumped off, Will tried to pitch to the side. Tuck and roll, just like they'd taught him. Of course, drills couldn't prepare you for the massive shock of hitting the interstate with nothing but your own body fat to cushion your fall. Will hit the pavement like a clapper striking a bell. His entire skeleton jangled inside his skin.

Will was no stranger to getting the shit knocked out of him. He'd blacked out before. Somewhere in his mind, he knew how to fight it, but it was too late for thinking. He saw more stars, then darkness, then nothing at all.

Will was sitting in the back of an ambulance when a black Suburban with smoked glass pulled into the parking lot of the Lil' Dixie Gas-n-Go.

"You all right?" the paramedic asked. "You just groaned."

"Yeah," Will said. He *had* groaned. And with good reason. "Just having a bad day."

"No shit, dude." The paramedic looked back at the Suburban. An older woman with a helmet of salt-and-pepper hair jumped down from the driver's seat. She called something to the passenger, a blonde wearing the Georgia Bureau of Investigation's regulation dark blue shirt and tan khakis.

The paramedic noted, "Somebody called in the big guns."

"Yeah," Will repeated. He angled himself out of the ambulance, wincing from the pain in his shoulder. "Thanks for patching me up."

"You might wanna get that looked at."

"It's all right." Will winced as he tried to shrug his shoulder, which felt like it had slammed into the pavement going thirty miles an hour. He asked, "That cop gonna be all right?"

"Still in surgery." The man tilted his head to the side like he had to consider the prognosis. "He's young. In good shape. That goes a long way." He glanced back at the Suburban. The driver had her hands on her hips. She wore sunglasses, but even a blind man could see the flames of fury burning in her eyes. "I bet they got some questions for you." He looked at Will. "You ask me, you're some kind of hero taking out that guy with your bike. Probably saved that lady's life."

"It was a good bike," Will said. "Closed loop, sequential, port injection with heated oxygen sensor."

"Damn." The man slowly shook his head, and they both shared a moment of silence for the fallen Dark Horse.

"Thanks again." Reluctantly, Will headed toward the Suburban. There was an escort for him, a Clayton County cop who was shaped like a shepherd's crook. In keeping with the theme, he herded Will

toward the black SUV. Will pulled the cotton out of his nose as he walked. It hurt like a bitch, but this was not the kind of crowd you wanted to show weakness to.

Law enforcement officers were everywhere – Clayton County cops, Forest Park cops, Clayton County sheriff's deputies, some officers from the Georgia Highway Patrol, and a smattering of GBI agents, who were trickling in from the Panthersville Road headquarters. The entrance to the parking lot was blocked by several cruisers. Crime scene tape crisscrossed the broken plate glass. A white sheet covered the dead body inside the store. Yellow cards marked spent shells, fibers, trace evidence.

And yet, no one was doing much of anything. They all knew that jurisdiction wasn't something that had to be hashed out. Pro forma, the GBI was always asked to investigate officer-involved shootings. Even Will's escort peeled off when they reached the Suburban's gravitational field. The SUV was a G-ride, short for "government ride." The vehicles the GBI used were easy to spot if you knew what you were looking for. The rear was lower to the ground than the front because of the heavy metal gun cabinets bolted in back.

The GBI was to the state of Georgia what the FBI was to the country. Despite what Hollywood portrayed, neither agency could just waltz in and take over an investigation. Except in instances of child abduction or drug trafficking, the GBI had to be invited onto a case before they could work it.

Clayton County, by virtue of its squalor, offered another exception. After the county's coroner was caught running a drug ring out of the back of his funeral parlor, it was decided by all involved that it would just be easier to pay the state to perform all of the county's medical examiner duties. This included but was not limited to cases of murder. And in this particular case, a man had definitely been murdered. Sure, he'd been in the process of robbing a convenience store, but murder was murder.

Then there was the guy Will had plastered with his bike. Like the cop who'd been shot, the driver of the Chevy had been rushed to the hospital. Unlike the cop, he probably wouldn't make it. Will didn't know if that counted as an officer-involved death or vehicular homicide. The only thing he was certain of was that his boss was about to stick her foot as far up his ass as it would go.

"What the hell are you doing here?" Deputy Director Amanda Wagner snapped off her sunglasses. Will had been right about

flames of fury in her eyes, though up close, they certainly burned a lot hotter. "You were supposed to be in Macon this morning. You should be checking in with your parole officer right now."

Will looked to his partner for help. Faith Mitchell's gaze settled on the giant sign in the window that advertised cold frozen drinks inside. She looked back at Will, offering an almost imperceptible shake of her head.

Amanda said, "Arrest him."

Faith looked as surprised as Will felt.

"Bill Black is a material witness to a crime who is also on parole and who also has a history of armed robbery." Amanda's voice turned into a low hiss. "Seventy-five thousand dollars, Will. That's how much it cost to put you undercover. And that doesn't include the thirty grand we're going to owe Fulton County for the motorcycle. You are officially costing me more than you're worth."

"I'm sorry," Will said, trying hard not to make it sound like a question.

"You'd better just be damn glad no one was close enough to get your face in those videos." She nodded to Faith. "Cuff him."

Faith mumbled something that was just loud enough for Will to hear. Still, she took out her handcuffs. "Turn around."

"My shoulder kind of hurts."

Faith gave a heavy sigh. "Hands out front."

Will held out his hands, mindful that cops from at least five agencies were watching his arrest. Amanda probably had a point about his cover. He still had an undercover case to work in Macon, which was about an hour from where they stood. Cops talked to each other all the time. They would share the story of the con who ran his bike into a guy standing in the middle of the interstate.

Will wondered if it looked as cool as he remembered.

Amanda said, "Read him his rights before you bring him into the store." She slid her sunglasses back on. Her high heels made a snapping sound as she walked across the parking lot. Probably from her cloven hooves rubbing together.

Faith ratcheted down the handcuffs. "You stopped for an Icee, didn't you?"

Will exercised his right to remain silent.

"Did you lose consciousness?"

"No," he lied.

"Are you going to tell Sara about this?"

"Of course," he lied again. In order to tell Sara what had happened, he would have to tell her why he was on his way to Macon.

"So," Will said. "There's video?"

"Amanda's right. From what we've seen, nobody got a good shot of your face."

He tried, "How about that motorcycle trick? Cool, right?"

"It reminds me of Evel Knievel." She made sure the handcuffs were tight. "You know, when he tried to jump over the Snake River Canyon on his bike."

He gently corrected, "The X-2 Skycycle was a steam-powered rocket, not a motorbike."

"Whatever, Will. How'd it go for him?"

Will didn't answer her. There was a reason Knievel still held the world record for most broken bones in a lifetime. "You look nice today."

Faith jerked him toward the store. Will wasn't certain whether it was kindness or forgetfulness that made her drag him by his uninjured arm.

They found Amanda standing in front of an old tube television set behind the counter. She was surrounded by beefy, tall cops, but her presence was such that the men seemed reduced around her. Amanda had spent her life in law enforcement. Her father had been a cop. She'd come up when the only thing the Atlanta Police Department could agree on was that women didn't belong in uniform. To say there was a chip on her shoulder was to say that Chuck Norris was kind of a badass.

She didn't look up when Faith dragged Will inside, but obviously she knew he was there. "Mr. Black, would that be you hiding behind the Yodels?"

Will leaned in, squinting at the paused image. The camera was mounted over the front counter, but instead of capturing the front doors, the lens was pointed toward the back of the convenience store. There Will was – curled into a ball, hands over his head.

He said, "I believe those are Little Debbies."

The laughter died down as quickly as it started. A pointed look from Amanda cleared the front of the building. She waited until just Will and Faith were left in the store with her.

"Run it down for me," she told Will, though history told him that she likely had more information than he did.

Still, he gave her the highlights, substituting the Icee quest for a gas run. "I guess he got scared when he heard the sirens," Will said, meaning the driver of the Chevy. "He ran out of the store, jumped into his truck. I pursued. You know what happened next."

"Everyone does. It's all over Hooter."

Will hoped she meant Twitter.

Amanda supplied, "The driver of the truck has been identified as Wayne Michael Walker. He's at the hospital now. It doesn't look good. The cop got off a shot before your little chase. Nicked the femoral artery. Of course, that pales in comparison to taking a full-body slam from a ten-thousand-pound motorcycle."

Will said, "It's probably closer to seven hundred."

She pressed together her lips before continuing, "Walker's fifty-three years old. He's a high school counselor, recently fired from the Clayton County school system."

Faith gave a low whistle. It took a lot to get fired from Clayton County. "What'd he do, slap a kid?"

"Yes."

Faith seemed a little shocked.

"At any rate," Amanda continued, doling out the information she'd obviously gleaned on the drive down, "Walker's accomplice worked at the same school – Spivey Senior High. Math teacher."

"He didn't look like a teacher," Will said. "He looked like a homeless man."

Amanda picked her way across the debris littering the floor. Will stepped in to help her when she knelt in front of the dead body, then he remembered he was in handcuffs and that people in handcuffs didn't tend to help the police.

She pulled back the sheet. "Douglas Raymond Pierce. Doug-Ray to his friends. Coached girls' softball. School-wide teacher of the year last year."

Will accepted that he really was some kind of idiot. The John Deere baseball cap was tilted back on Doug-Ray Pierce's head, giving Will a clear view of where dreadlocks had been sewn into the rim. Likewise, the bushy porn mustache was a fake. The spotty goatee was all Doug-Ray. Take off the disguise, and he looked like every math teacher/coach Will had ever had.

"What about their next of kin?" Faith asked. She was scrolling through the closed-circuit footage. Will looked at the set. He saw himself dive behind the Little Debbies. And then the film reversed

and he ran backward. And then the film played out and he went down again.

Amanda supplied, "The driver, Wayne Walker, was born and raised in Forest Park. He got his degree from Clayton State College. He's twice divorced, currently single. Both exes live outside the state – one in Idaho, the other in Massachusetts. He has a twenty-year-old daughter who's stationed in Afghanistan. We're trying to track them all down, but it's rough going." She paused, and Will could tell she was exasperated for other reasons now. "Walker has no history of violence except for slapping that student. He's as financially stable as you'd think a high school counselor would be, usually pays his bills late, but he always pays them. He hasn't been issued a speeding ticket in the last seven years. He has a master's in social work, for what that's worth. And I should add that universally, one word came up in all the interviews we've conducted so far: 'asshole.'"

"And Pierce?" Faith asked, not looking up from the TV. Will saw himself diving again.

"On paper, Doug-Ray Pierce is more of the same. We found nothing on his record but a speeding ticket in Florida three years ago," Amanda told them. "Personal details are still being filled out. He's new to the area – been here less than two years. Before that, he taught in west Georgia. We've got people heading over to Spivey High to conduct interviews. Preliminarily, no one seems to know much about Pierce. His emergency contact is his father, who died three months ago. Pierce was a loner by all accounts, never talked about his private life. Except for Wayne Walker, he didn't seem to have any friends."

"Gay?" Faith asked.

"Not if you take off the mustache," Amanda quipped. "What exactly are you doing?"

Faith paused the footage again. She pointed to the screen. "Look here."

Amanda normally kept her reading glasses on a chain around her neck. Will guessed she'd left them in the car. She leaned forward, her nose almost touching the screen. "What am I looking at?"

"Here." Faith pointed to the fish-eye mirror. "This is the only camera in the store, but you can see some of the front entrance in the fish-eye mirror. Watch the truck."

Will leaned in, too. The footage was the kind you normally found

in convenience stores. The equipment was old. The VCR tapes were reused. The average cell phone camera had a hundred times better resolution. Still, he could clearly make out a man crawling out of the back of the truck. He kept low, knees bent, back curved, as he shuffled away. Instead of going into the store, he headed toward the back.

Three robbers, not two. One in the truck. One in the store. One securing the exit.

Faith asked, "No known associates on either man?"

Amanda had her phone out. She dialed a number as she told Faith, "We've got data processing running their backgrounds. It could be an hour or more before the computers spit anything out." She held up her finger for silence as she put the phone to her ear. It was answered on the first ring. She said, "Nick, we've got a third suspect, possibly on foot. He was hiding in the back of the truck. Close down the perimeter for five miles. Pull all recently reported stolen vehicles. I want door knocks on every house within a two-mile radius. Send me a tracking team and start a fingertip search of the woods behind the store."

She nodded as Nick obviously relayed some new information to her.

Will looked down at his cuffed wrists. His back had been to the window when the guy jumped out of the truck, but he still felt bad for missing what was obviously an important clue. And that wasn't all he'd missed.

Will asked, "Where's the bag of money?"

Faith said, "Is that what you had?"

"What are you two talking about?" Amanda had finished her call. "What money?"

Faith fast-forwarded the tape, and Will saw his mad scramble down the aisle, the plastic bag full of cash gripped tightly in his hand. Faith paused the image. The bag was on the floor. They all turned in unison and looked at the same spot on the floor.

The money was gone.

"Well." Amanda paused dramatically before continuing, "If only we had a way to know what happened to that bag."

Faith took the hint. She fast-forwarded the tape. Will saw himself stand up again. This time, instead of walking backward, he was running forward to tackle Wayne Walker.

"There you go," Faith said. The girl from the front counter had

apparently not run out the back door to find help. She'd stuck around, waited for the right moment, then sneaked back in and grabbed the bag of cash.

Faith paused the tape. "This doesn't make sense. The person who got out of the back of the truck looked like a man."

"That's because he was. Is." Will explained, "That's the girl behind the counter. She took the money on her way out."

"No." Faith shook her head. "We've got her outside. She's a hundred years old if she's a day."

Will shook his head, too. "She's twenty, tops."

"How hard did you hit your head?" Faith indicated an old woman sitting in the back of a police cruiser. The door was open. Her long gray hair was disheveled. Her blue dress was faded from too many washings. Even from twenty feet away, it was obvious to Will that the woman's face more closely resembled a dried apple core.

Amanda supplied, "She's the mother-in-law of the store owner. He's currently out of town on business. She can't recall where he is, and the Lil' Dixie Gas-n-Go corporate phone number rings at the store." Amanda indicated the old woman with a wave of her hand. "Samantha Lewis, or Maw-Maw, as she likes to be called, said she was working here all morning. She's sketchy on the details, but I've had worse eye witnesses."

Faith pointed out, "She couldn't bend down to pick up that bag of money, let alone run like that."

Will wondered if Faith was right about his head. Then again, Will could clearly recall the girl behind the cash register, the way she'd eyed him appreciatively after the cop had tried to rattle his cage.

He walked around the counter and started searching the shelves, which was made infinitely more difficult because of his cuffed wrists.

"What are you doing?" Amanda asked. "That area hasn't been cleared yet."

Admittedly, Will didn't know much about women, but he knew that they didn't go anywhere without their purses. That is, unless there was an opportunity to exchange their purse for a bag of cash.

He pulled out a pink handbag with green and blue spots all over it. Certainly not the kind of thing an elderly woman would choose. Will tried the zipper, but his hands were too close together to do anything useful.

Faith already had on a pair of gloves. She grabbed the bag and

dumped the contents onto the counter. Will felt an inordinate amount of relief when he saw the pink lip gloss he recalled the girl applying to her lips. Faith was more interested in the wallet. She read from the license, "Billie Eugenia Lam, born October 9, 1994."

The name sounded old-fashioned, but the photo showed the young girl Will remembered.

He said, "That's her. She was behind the counter the whole time."

Faith asked, "What the hell? Maw-Maw said in her statement that she was ducked behind the counter the entire time."

"What the hell, indeed." Amanda crossed her arms over her chest. "According to the interrogating officer, Maw-Maw says she works here three days a week. When she's not volunteering at the church, that is."

"What a sweet old lady." Faith flipped through the photographs in the young girl's wallet. Will looked over her shoulder. He saw the usual stuff—Billie and friends posing with pouty lips and too much makeup, snapshots from a fun day at Six Flags, a photo of the dance floor at some club they weren't old enough to get into.

There were no family photos, but the last picture showed Billie from a few years earlier. She must've been in high school. She also must've been into sports. She was wearing a red and white uniform. Her ballcap was low. She had a softball bat resting on her shoulder.

Faith asked, "What do you wanna bet Doug-Ray Pierce was her coach? Only this uniform isn't from Spivey High." She explained, "Jeremy used to play Spivey during regionals." Her son had been a basketball player. "Their uniforms are green and white. The mascot is a Mustang. This looks like a ladybug on her chest."

Amanda reminded them, "Doug-Ray Pierce taught in west Georgia before he moved to Forest Park two years ago."

"Maybe he was diddling his players, Billie being one of them. She followed Mr. Pierce from west Georgia. She gets a job here, they do this heist."

Amanda finished, "And Maw-Maw lies to keep her granddaughter from going to prison."

Will didn't completely buy the theory. "That would make sense if Pierce did it on his own. There's Walker and the third guy from the back of the truck. Plus, Pierce is a pretty crappy bad guy. He wasn't easy with the shotgun."

"Winchester Model 24." Faith looked at the weapon on the floor. Someone had secured it with a zip tie, looping the plastic through

the breach. "Pistol grip, beavertail forend, full choke."

Amanda cut to the point. "That's not the kind of weapon you rob a convenience store with." She started typing into her phone. "I'll put a fire under ballistics and see if we can trace ownership."

Faith bent down by the weapon. "Serial number's been sanded off."

Amanda gripped her phone.

Will ran it through his head again, Doug-Ray Pierce's shaking voice as he told Billie to give him the money, the man's strange rebel yell before he pulled the second trigger.

Will said, "Pierce didn't seem to know that he only had two shots."

"So, our math teacher isn't an evil genius."

"My money's on the school counselor." Faith had watched the tape through and was ready to render her opinion. "He shot Pierce in the head, bull's-eye, straight on. He nearly killed you, too, by the way." She gave Will a look that he really didn't need to see. "Wayne Walker is thoughtful, methodical, a planner. He knew when to cut rope. He could've grabbed the cash, but he ran when he heard the sirens."

"Scared of getting caught?" Will suggested.

"Too smart to get caught," Faith countered. "Remember what Amanda just said: everybody anybody's talked to so far says Walker's an asshole. He's probably the kind of guy who tries to control things. Look at the tape when he gets back into the truck. He doesn't have to think about it. He jumps in, heads straight for the road, takes his turn onto the interstate. If this stupid store kept their surveillance tapes, we'd probably see him doing dry runs for the past two weeks."

Will looked at Amanda. She could be a horrible person, but she'd never gone after them for tossing around theories.

"Spit it out," she told him, rolling her hand to urge him on.

He said, "Walker got fired for slapping a student. That doesn't sound like somebody who has everything under control."

"Have you been in a high school since you graduated?" Faith asked. "I'd probably slap those kids until my hands fell off."

She wasn't exactly the poster child for patience, but Will said, "Walker hesitated when he hit the main road. The turn onto the interstate was at the last minute."

"On purpose?" Faith asked, and Will couldn't really answer the

question. Walker's last-minute turn had sent the cruiser straight into the bridge railing. Except for Will, he probably would've gotten away.

"All right." Amanda ended the speculation. She was staring at Samantha Lewis sitting in the back of the cruiser. Maw-Maw knew how to work the old-lady thing. Someone had brought her a blanket and a bottle of water. "What now?"

Faith indicated Billie Lam's license. "We go to Billie's address. This license was issued less than a year ago. She probably still lives there."

"You think she's stupid enough to go home with the money?"

"I think criminals being stupid is what keeps us in business."

"Fair enough," Amanda allowed. "Report back. And run down every detail you can find on this Billie Eugenia Lam. I want to know what she had for lunch yesterday afternoon."

"Yes, ma'am."

Out of habit, Will started to follow Faith.

"Not so fast, Mr. Black." Amanda smiled like she meant it. "I've got other plans for you."

Will sat in the manager's office of the Gas-n-Go, counting backward in his head by sevens. He'd started at a thousand and was in the low two hundreds when he heard Amanda's voice from somewhere inside the store.

Or at least he thought it was Amanda's voice. He'd never heard her sound so kind in his life.

"I know, dear," she said. "I'm sorry we have to keep you. We're just going to leave you back here for a few minutes while I find someone to drive you home."

There was a low hum – a woman's voice, frail and incoherent. By process of elimination, Will guessed Amanda was speaking to Samantha Lewis, a.k.a. Maw-Maw.

Sure enough, a moment later, the old woman appeared in the office doorway. Amanda's hand was cupped underneath her elbow, her arm wrapped around the woman's waist as she helped her shuffle into the room.

Amanda said, "Oh," when she saw Will, as if she'd forgotten he was there.

Will stood up, muscle memory compelling him to go to his feet when a woman entered.

Amanda's tone was more what he was used to when she directed, "Stay out in the hall, Mr. Black. Keep your mouth shut and your eyes where they belong. And be mindful that there are at least a hundred police officers surrounding this building."

Will muttered some soft obscenities as he walked into the hallway. He watched Amanda help Maw-Maw settle into the chair. She needed the assistance. Up close, Will would've put her age somewhere in the mid-eighties. Her balance was off. She didn't sit in the chair so much as fall back and trust there was something to catch her.

Amanda asked, "Ms. Lewis, are you sure I can't get you anything? Is there someone I can call?"

"Oh, no, dear. I wish I could remember where my son-in-law is,

but so much has happened today that it's set my brain all a'buzz."

Amanda pressed, "We haven't been able to locate a phone number for him other than at the store."

"I'm sure it'll come to me. I don't set much by these new-fangled telephones you can carry around in your pocket." Maw-Maw patted Amanda's hand. "I'll let you know the minute I remember."

"I'll be right outside the store if you need me."

Amanda gave Will a nasty look as she left the office. He was fairly certain he would've gotten the same response even without the old woman. He watched her walk up the hall. Instead of heading toward the exit, she stopped about fifteen feet away. Amanda leaned her shoulder against the wall. She crossed her arms and waited.

Will looked back at the old woman in the office. She was probably under a hundred pounds, even with her heavy orthopedic shoes on. Her dress was too big for her frame. He imagined it was the smallest size she could find. She was built like a bird, from her narrow shoulders to her tiny wrists, which reminded him of Pixy Stix because of the various rubber bracelets she wore. Livestrong. Breast cancer research. Support our troops. Will had seen a display of the bands by the cash register. He wondered if she'd paid for them, and then he felt guilty for thinking that the old woman would steal.

Of course, she had already lied to the police, so there was that.

"Well." Maw-Maw glanced up at him, curious, but too polite to stare.

Will turned his attention to the scenery out the back door. Amanda wasn't lying about the cops. He counted at least ten men walking around the field behind the building, and that was just the cops who were in his line of sight.

The old woman asked, "Is the lesbian gone?" There was a waver to her voice, like a weak signal from a radio station. She tried to make it stronger, yelling, "I asked, is the—"

"Yes."

"Good." Maw-Maw was smiling at him like she hadn't just said what she'd said. "She thinks she's hiding it with that skirt, but you can always tell. We can't forget that Satan was the most beautiful angel before the Fall."

Will didn't know what to say, so he concentrated on not looking up the hallway, where Amanda was probably pulling her gun out of

her purse.

Maw-Maw whispered, "Why'd you cover for me?"

Will cleared his throat. He took his time answering. "Cover for what?"

She seemed exasperated. "About this morning. You know I wasn't here."

Will shrugged. He assumed Bill Black would lie to the cops as a matter of pride.

"Is it money you're after?" Tears came into her eyes. She clutched the neck of her dress in her frail hand. "I'm an old woman on a fixed income. There's nothing I can offer."

Will couldn't look at her, mostly because he felt like the worst sort of bad person, the kind who preyed on old people.

Down the hall, he heard a thumping sound: Amanda's high heel hitting the floor, sort of like the way a horse thief digs its heels into the flesh of an innocent pony.

Will swallowed, then made himself look back up. "Why'd you lie?"

"Please, mister ..." Her voice took on a pleading quality. She was still afraid he would tell. "I know it's wrong, but I had my reasons."

"She your granddaughter?" Will guessed from her reaction that he was on the right track. There weren't a lot of reasons to volunteer yourself up to the police. "They're gonna find her. They know her name. Billie Lam."

Maw-Maw looked terrified by the news. "How do they know?"

"I heard the cops talking to the lesbian." He let a smile come, figuring it might make him look devious. "They found Billie's purse under the counter. They know she was here."

She slumped back into the chair, nearly disappearing in the dress. Her head started shaking. He wasn't sure if this was on purpose or from some kind of palsy. "This is down to my worthless son-in-law."

"He robbed his own store?"

"Of course not. Why would he rob himself?" She kept shaking her head. "After Billie's mama died, all he cared about was taking them expensive fishing trips and taking money outta the store." She shrugged. "Of course, he's a kike. What did I expect?"

Will wasn't up on his racial slurs. "Kike," he echoed. "Is that for Polacks?"

"Jews," she corrected. "Where're you from?"

"Atlanta."

"Huh," she said, like that explained it. "What else did you hear the po-lice say?"

Will took a gamble. "You first."

"Pierce," she told him. "That's the colored man got shot."

"I heard he got caught having sex with a student."

Maw-Maw raised an eyebrow, but she didn't reveal whether or not that student had been her granddaughter. "You know what we used to call his type back in my day? Farm equipment."

Will found himself blinking too rapidly. Maw-Maw just sat there innocently with her hands curled in her lap, legs crossed at her tiny ankles. She had to be the most adorable racist Will had ever met in his life.

He said, "If you really wanna help your granddaughter, you'll tell the police where she is. They just wanna know what happened. She won't be in any trouble."

She started shaking her head again. "Ain't no situation ever got better with the police involved."

"She wasn't part of the robbery. She just saw a good opportunity and took it."

She kept shaking her head. This time, he could tell it was on purpose.

Will said, "You can get into a lot of trouble for lying to the police. It pisses them off, and you don't want them pissed off when they find her."

Maw-Maw seemed to think it over. For just a moment, Will thought she was going to give up her granddaughter.

And then something changed.

She sat up in her chair. She looked down at the handcuffs around his wrists. "Why are you asking me all these questions? You sound more like the po-lice than a criminal."

Will caught movement out of the corner of his eye. Faith had taken Amanda's place down the hallway. She was leaning forward, practically hanging on every word.

Will tried, "I'm just trying to help you out."

"I don't need your help," she snapped, though he was pretty sure she couldn't get out of the chair without assistance, let alone ensure her granddaughter's safety. "I can do fine by myself."

"Lookit, I don't care one way or the other." Will tried to put some authority in his voice. As sexist as it sounded, women of Maw-Maw's generation generally responded well to men in authority.

"I'm just offering some friendly advice. The police can protect her. You can't do this on your own."

Some of her resolve seemed to slip. "I don't know."

"Anything you can tell them would be helpful."

"I guess I could tell them some. Since they know she's my granddaughter anyway." She seemed to think of an idea. "I can tell 'em about Billie helping with the nursery at the church. She's good like that, good with children."

"You need to tell them where she is."

Maw-Maw opened her mouth. Will could practically see the words moving to the tip of her tongue. And then she clammed up. "I just don't know, sonny. Hand to the Bible, I would tell them where she is, but I just don't know."

Will leaned into a curve as Faith sped toward the hospital. He felt like he was on his bike again, but they were in Amanda's SUV, which wasn't built for zigzagging across the road.

"She was so smug," Faith said, meaning Maw-Maw. "It's like she thinks we can't touch her."

Will stared at her. "What did you hear in the hallway? That wasn't my read at all."

"Please. She played you like a fiddle. All that old-woman bullshit, meanwhile she's lying to the police. She's obstructing a case. A cop was shot. Another man was killed. You were nearly shot in the process. You could've died. Wayne Walker caused millions of dollars in damage trying to get away. That old biddy knows something, and she should pay for holding it back."

"Well, when you put it that way."

"How else would I put it?"

Will didn't have an answer for her.

"You never knew your grandmother. Trust me, they're not all they're cracked up to be."

Will tried to move her along. "What did you find out about Billie Lam?"

Faith had to breathe through it before she could answer. "Not much more than what Maw-Maw told us, which – believe me – has me more worried than not." She beeped her horn at a car that wasn't moving fast enough. "Billie Lam is a college dropout. Her mother died when she was twelve. No siblings. No cousins. Maw-Maw said the father isn't around much. He uses the income from the store to go on fishing trips down in the Gulf. They don't see him for weeks at a time."

Will might have fallen for the old woman, but Faith had a point about not taking all of this information at face value. "Did you lift any prints from Lam's purse?"

"She's not in the system."

"You ran a records check?"

“Through the DMV, through the county systems, through every single database we have access to.” She listed it out. “We don’t know her social security number. We don’t have her credit score. We don’t have a cell phone number for her. We don’t know who her friends are. We don’t know jack.”

“Have you talked to the father?”

“More don’ts. No phone number. No address. His credit record is a mess, but everything is registered to the store or a PO box. Maybe he lives with his mother-in-law, but who knows? The agent who drove Maw-Maw home went into her house. You know this. There was no one inside. He checked the place top to bottom.”

She was right. Will did know all of this. He knew that the same agent was sitting outside Maw-Maw’s house, that both Doug-Ray Pierce’s house and Wayne Walker’s apartment had been turned upside down. They’d been working this case for nearly three hours and still nothing viable had turned up.

Faith said, “While you were enjoying your chat with Maw-Maw, I rattled some cages at the school board. Didn’t you think it was weird that Doug-Ray Pierce got fired for messing with a student, but he walked onto a job in another county?”

“I just assumed Clayton was desperate for teachers.”

“Me too,” Faith said, “but apparently even they have standards. Somebody pulled in some big favors to get Doug-Ray Pierce hired in Clayton County.”

“Wayne Walker,” Will guessed, because it was the only thing that made sense. “He’s older. He had what passes for tenure around here. He’d know people at the county office.”

“Exactly.” Faith took another sharp turn. Will grabbed the dashboard.

She told him, “A secretary at the county office gave me the story. Walker vouched for Pierce, said that he was fired off rumors, that nothing was proven – which is technically true – that they went after him because he’s a black man and he was accused by a white student. *Birth of a Nation*, yada-yada.”

Will was missing a connection. “How did Billie Lam know Wayne Walker?”

“Walker went to their church. So says the secretary.” Faith shook her head. “This is still a small town. Everybody’s up in everybody else’s business.”

“Not that it’s been much help.” Will rubbed his face, trying to

concentrate. "Maw-Maw said the son-in-law is Jewish."

Faith glanced his way. "They go to an Episcopal church. His name is Gilbert Caldwell. I just assumed he was Billie's stepfather." She wrinkled her forehead. "Why would Maw-Maw lie about him being Jewish?"

Will shook his head, too. It seemed Maw-Maw lied just for the sake of lying. "What about friends? Billie had pictures in her wallet. She must've known people from church or school."

"We're talking to people from both, but Billie's a ghost. She's nineteen years old. We don't know what school she went to because Maw-Maw can't remember. Billie doesn't have a record. She doesn't own a car. She's never filed a tax return. We don't know her social security number, so we can't pull her bank accounts. I'm sure she has a cell phone but who the hell knows what the number is." Faith slowed the Suburban, turning in to the hospital parking lot. "I tried to look her up on Twitter and Facebook, but the only Lam in the area is a sixty-year-old parole officer who lives in Atlanta. I sent her a message. She's never heard of her."

Will racked his brain for other ways to find the girl. "The family doesn't have other properties? She's hiding out somewhere."

"No properties. We're knocking on every door at every fleabag motel around."

"That's a lot of motels," Will said. Forest Park was near the airport. You couldn't throw a rock without hitting a motel. "Billie got to work somehow. She has to have a car."

"Maw-Maw's powder blue Honda was parked behind the store. We turned it inside out." Faith bumped the gear into park. "Nothing. That's the story of this case: nothing."

Will pushed open the car door. "Either she's a criminal mastermind or she's very lucky."

"Or both."

He followed Faith to the loading dock, asking, "Any reason Amanda wants me here?"

"I don't question orders."

She was a better liar than Maw-Maw. "I'm still maintaining my cover, right?"

"I guess so. She told me to bring you through the back. McClendon's out of surgery, but there are still cops all over the place." She stepped on a chock and boosted herself onto the loading dock. "Pete McClendon, that's the name of the cop who was shot."

“He clean?”

“Who the hell knows? The doctors are keeping him in a coma because of the pain. We won’t get to talk to him for another day at least.”

The large metal door was rolled only partway up. Faith walked underneath, but Will had to bend down to make the clearance. He pulled his phone out of his pocket to check the time. The glass was scratched. He felt lucky Amanda hadn’t logged it into evidence just to prove a point. It was only a few minutes after noon. Will guessed all the dockworkers were at lunch.

Faith took a moment to get her bearings, consulting the emergency exit map to find the freight elevator. Will helped her lift the heavy door, which opened like a guillotine. Carts of soiled laundry lined the back wall of the car. They both stared ahead as the elevator creaked into action, taking them to the top floor.

Will said, “All this because of the blinking light on an Icee machine.”

Her jaw set. “Sure. That’s why.”

“Five minutes later, I would’ve been out of there.”

She wouldn’t look at him.

He said, “There was a Triumph at the impound lot. I guess I can use that when I go down to Macon.”

“Make sure it has a cup holder.”

The elevator groaned to a stop. She finally looked at him.

“Oh.” Will was slow on the uptake. He would’ve been trapped at the store even longer while he drank the Icee. “Have I ever told you that you’re a really good detective?”

“Whatever.” Faith lifted the elevator door. She didn’t look back to make sure Will followed. They had about twenty feet of hallway before a turn. He tried to think of a witty rejoinder, but then he turned the corner and saw Amanda.

She was waiting for them by the nurses’ station. As usual, she was reading something on her phone. She didn’t look up as she asked, “Anything?”

Will figured it was his turn to take one for the team. “No, ma’am. We’re trying to verify Maw-Maw’s story, but we’re hitting a lot of dead ends.”

She still didn’t look up. “Talk to that patrolman over there.”

Faith walked over to the cop. He was so young Will doubted he had to shave more than twice a week. “You have something for us

—” Faith read his name off his uniform – “Mixon?”

“Yes, ma’am.” The cop took off his hat. “Pete was in that store every day at the same time. I was his boot for three months. We went there every single day.”

Will knew a boot was what they called a patrolman in training. He asked, “Why did he go in there?”

Mixon didn’t seem to want to answer Will’s question, probably because Will looked like a thug.

Faith said, “Why did he go there?”

Mixon was still reluctant, but he finally said, “He was sweet on the girl worked behind the counter.”

“Seems like a lot of men were,” Faith noted. “Why wasn’t McClendon wearing his vest when he went into the store?”

Mixon shrugged. “He always had it on when I worked with him.”

“His logs didn’t report anything suspicious at the store. Did he say something to you? Indicate there might be a problem?”

“No, ma’am. I’d tell you straight out.” He rolled his hat in his hands like pizza dough. “I was thinking, though, if they cased the place, then they’d know Pete was there at the same time every day. Maybe this was a hit? Something professional set up by one of the gangs?”

“Did McClendon deal with any gangs?”

“Well, no, ma’am. His beat cuts through an industrial area. He was mostly called out to break-ins and such. There’s been a ton of robberies around there, usually in the early hours, sometimes late at night. Smash and grab. Real organized. We got our detectives on it, but they ain’t caught nobody yet.”

Faith had spent the first decade of her career in a squad car. She knew what the pay was like. “Did McClendon have any other jobs? Something he did for extra cash?”

“I know he taught CPR classes over at Spivey. Some of the teachers wanted to get certified ’cause of all these school shootings.”

“Spivey,” Faith echoed. “Thank you, Officer. We’ll be in touch if we have any questions.”

He put his hat back on and headed toward the stairs.

Faith said, “Pete McClendon worked at Spivey Senior High.”

As usual, Amanda was a step ahead of them. “According to the principal, Wayne Walker recommended McClendon to teach the CPR course.”

Will tried to get a handle on where they were. They'd all worked robberies before. Usually it was through familial or community connections that they were able to break open a case. "We've got Pete McClendon tied to Wayne Walker through the school, Wayne Walker to Billie Lam through the church, Doug-Ray Pierce to Billie Lam possibly through softball camp, maybe even a teacher-student affair."

Faith added, "What about the third man in the back of the truck? Where are we on finding him?"

"The same place we were three hours ago – clueless." Amanda sounded exasperated. "Wayne Walker just woke up from surgery. They stopped the bleeding, set his pelvis and both arms, wrapped his ribs, which have been rendered into oatmeal, but he's refused further treatment."

"Can he do that?"

"This is America. We have a constitutional right to make unhealthy choices." Amanda started down the hall. They followed. "His fever's spiked. The gunshot wound was a ricochet, low velocity. It's just a matter of time."

Will knew this was bad news. A high-velocity bullet generated enough heat to cauterize and disinfect the wound. A low-velocity shot opened up the body to all kinds of infection.

Amanda said, "He wasn't in the best of health to begin with. Brittle diabetic, pack-a-day smoker, high blood pressure, overweight, and then there's the melanoma he's been fighting for the last four years." She stopped outside a closed door where a GBI agent stood guard. "He knows he's going to die without treatment. Let's pray he wants to unburden his soul."

Faith started to go in, but Amanda stopped her.

"Mr. Walker has made it clear he's not going to waste the last few hours of his life explaining himself to a woman."

At least Will finally understood why Amanda had let him come to the hospital. He pushed open the door. Sunlight flooded the room, probably some doctor's or nurse's attempt to bring in some UV rays and kill the infection.

And there was no mistaking that an infection was raging inside Wayne Walker's body. The blankets covering him were soaked through. He shivered like a parody of someone who was freezing to death. His teeth chattered. What was left of his hair was stuck to his head like pieces of moldy straw. His eyes were wide with panic.

Sweat dripped down his face, pooled under his chin. He looked exactly like what he was: a man who was in the process of dying.

Still, Will took his time. Under Walker's watchful gaze, he dragged over a chair, letting the legs scrape the floor. Will stopped a few feet from the bed. He tried to keep his expression passive. In Will's experience, deathbed confessions weren't all they were cracked up to be. On the one hand, there were the people who held out a tiny sliver of hope that a miracle would occur. On the other were the people like Wayne Walker, who seemed ready to not only embrace death but give it a big, wet kiss.

Will sat down in the chair.

"You." Walker's teeth clicked around the word. He blinked rapidly, like he was afraid to close his eyes too long. "You're a cop."

Will guessed Wayne Walker had seen a lot sitting in that truck outside the convenience store. "That was a good shot," he told Walker. "Taking out Pierce like that. Right through the center of the head." Will didn't have to work to sound impressed. Walker was some kind of marksman. "I don't know a lot of cops who could make that shot."

Walker didn't respond. He just lay there shaking like a paint mixer. The pain must've been excruciating. Will could make out the cast covering his entire lower half. Both arms had been broken. Pins and bolts stuck out of the casts, which were frozen in a permanent Hammertime. His neck and face had been belt-sanded by a motorcycle tire. The shattered ribs alone must've been torturous. Will had broken his share of ribs. Just breathing could cause a knifelike stab to your lungs. Every movement put you in deeper agony.

Will said, "You know you're going to die if you don't let the doctors give you treatment."

Walker's shoulder jerked up, which Will guessed was voluntary. "Rather die than go to jail."

Will had heard these words before, but he'd rarely met someone who was ready to go through with it. "You got Doug-Ray Pierce the job at Spivey."

Walker's mouth worked, but it took a few seconds for him to make words. "Worthless cocksucker."

Will could see why people called this man an asshole. "He must've been your friend at some point."

"Fuck him. He was—" Walker was racked by a violent shudder.

He called out from the pain. "Oh, God!"

Will knew he should feel some kind of compassion. The man was a killer, but he was a human being in pain. Still, there was something so pervasively off-putting about the guy that all Will could do was sit back in the chair and wait for the episode to pass.

Walker clenched his jaw to stop his teeth from chattering. Will thought he was going to keep up the silence, but he hissed out, "It was Billie."

So, the teenager was at the heart of this after all.

"Pete was supposed to get shot in the arm."

"With a shotgun? By a man who didn't know how to use a shotgun?" No wonder Pete McClendon had stunk up the bathroom. Will's stomach would've been upset, too. "Tell me what's really going on here, Wayne. I know there's more."

"She was two-timing me."

"Billie?"

Walker watched him carefully. There was real fear in his eyes. Will was beginning to think death wasn't the man's biggest concern right now. He was either covering for the third man or he was covering for somebody else.

Will asked, "Where is she?"

Walker turned away. Guttural sounds came from his throat. Will wasn't sure, but it sounded like he was crying.

"Tell me where she is, Wayne. That's the only way she stays safe."

Walker didn't answer. Will guessed Billie had managed to tie him into knots. There was no other reason for him to protect her.

"You were a teacher," Will tried. "I know there's good left in you."

Walker's mouth opened in a sob. "Tell Terri ..." He stopped to swallow. "Terri ..."

"Your daughter?" Will remembered. Walker had a twenty-year-old serving in Afghanistan.

"Tell her ...," Walker began. "Tell her my last thoughts were about her." He had to stop to breathe through the pain. "Promise me you'll tell her that."

"I promise," Will said. "But you can tell her yourself, Wayne. Let the doctors treat you. You're not a bad guy. You just did a bad thing. You can make that right now."

"She's a soldier," Walker said. "I've always been proud of her."

"You can tell her that yourself."

Walker took a deep breath. His teeth started chattering again. Will thought he was having a seizure until the man mumbled, "Don't hurt her."

Will thought he meant Terri, but then he realized Walker was still worried about Billie. "I have no intention of hurting her." Will didn't think prison would hurt Billie that much. "Let's end this, Wayne. Tell me where she is. Maybe I'll let you see her before you go."

"Please." Tears streamed down Walker's face. "I did everything you told me to." His throat worked as he tried to swallow. "I'm begging you. Don't hurt her."

"I won't," Will repeated, wondering where this was coming from. Maybe the fever had reached Walker's brain. "I promise you, Wayne. I'll do everything I can to keep Billie safe."

"No!" His lips smacked together. They were darker now, almost black. "They got her at the house. You gotta save her."

"What house?" Will leaned over the man. He wanted to shake him, but he was already shaking too much on his own. "Who has her, Wayne? Who has Billie?"

"Not Billie," he whispered. "Gloria."

Will sat in the mobile command center watching the GBI's SWAT set up outside Gloria Pringle's house. They couldn't use Clayton County SWAT. According to Wayne Walker, Officer Pete McClendon was part of a ring of dirty cops who'd been robbing local businesses for the past year. There was no telling who else on the force was involved.

The speakers inside the converted box van buzzed with a low static. A man's voice said, "Team three, check." Another answered, "Team one, check."

Will thought about the story he'd finally gotten off Wayne Walker.

Four hostages were inside the two-story house: Gloria Pringle, her nineteen-year-old daughter, her twenty-year-old son, and the son's nineteen-year-old girlfriend.

They were being held by two masked men, all heavily armed, all ex-military. Wayne Walker had been very specific about the weapons inside the house. AKs. Fully automatic. Enough ammo to last through a long siege. Flash grenades. Explosives. Pipe bombs.

And Billie had orchestrated it all.

Will studied the bank of monitors inside the van. They showed real-time footage from the headcams the SWAT team wore. Two women checked inside Gloria Pringle's station wagon. Their weapons were out in front of them. He heard a woman's voice from the speakers. "Team six, check."

"Something's not adding up here," Will said, though Faith and Amanda were only half listening. Their eyes were glued to the monitors. Six men were stationed under each window in the front of the house. Another team was preparing to breach the front door while several other teams secured the back.

Will said, "There was maybe a thousand dollars in that cash register." He started pacing back and forth in the tight quarters. The van shifted with his weight. "There's three men outside that store: Walker, Pierce, and the third guy, the one who went around the

back. There's Billie inside. There's Pete McClendon, who's running some kind of French Connection. They've kidnapped Wayne Walker's girlfriend, her family, her son's girlfriend, so that's two more guys."

Faith was finally paying attention. "All for a thousand dollars."

"I don't care what kind of magical spell Billie casts on men, that's just south of a hundred fifty bucks each for a whole lot of risk." Will stopped pacing. He braced his hands above him on the ceiling. "Let's say I believe there's a ring of cops breaking into businesses."

"It's happened before," Amanda said.

"More than once before," Faith corrected. "We *are* talking about Clayton County."

"All right." Will relented. "We've got a ton of break-ins on Pete McClendon's beat. It's one of the most crime-ridden areas of the county, which – yes – that's saying a lot." Will paused for a breath. "Let's say McClendon was involved in all of those robberies. We're talking around ten thousand dollars each job – tools, light machinery, a couple of safes. McClendon hits them at night or early in the morning, when he knows nobody is going to be there. I buy him being in on that. But what happened at the Lil' Dixie doesn't fit his pattern."

Faith said, "Broad daylight, witnesses, right out in the open during rush-hour traffic."

"Right," Will said, glad she finally understood. "This doesn't sound like a stickup. This sounds like a hit where maybe they get to keep a little cash."

"Pete McClendon was the target," Amanda said. "That's an interesting theory."

"Maybe not just Pete McClendon. Doug-Ray Pierce was shot, too."

"You think Wayne Walker wanted them both dead so he could have Billie to himself?"

Faith said, "And his girlfriend. Don't forget Wayne said he's been dating Gloria for a year."

"About that," Will started.

Amanda's cell phone rang. She held up her finger for silence. Will watched her face as she listened to the call. And then he couldn't see her face anymore because she put her head in her hand.

Finally, she said, "Very well. We'll discuss this later."

Amanda made a show of putting her phone on the desk in front of her, setting it parallel to the edge. "That was Nick Shelton. Maw-

Maw gave his men the slip.”

Faith narrowed her eyes. “An eighty-four-year-old woman sneaked out of her house under the noses of two trained GBI agents?”

Amanda quipped, “Thank you for the summation, Faith. It wasn’t clear to me until now.”

The speaker crackled again. The SWAT team commander said, “Deputy Director, all teams in position. Good to go?”

Amanda tapped the button on the microphone. “Hold. Repeat – hold.” She looked at Will. “You’ve got twenty seconds. Finish your thought.”

Will ran through all the information they’d found while the SWAT team was staking a perimeter around Pringle’s house. “We couldn’t find one person at the school or the church who said Wayne Walker was dating Gloria Pringle. The pastor said he was under the impression that Gloria couldn’t even stand him, that there was some bad blood between them. That Wayne had bad blood with just about everybody.” Will repeated the pastor’s words. “Wayne Walker is an asshole. Even his ex-wives won’t return our calls because they don’t care whether he lives or dies.”

Faith got back to brass tacks. “We’ve got no phone calls between Wayne Walker and Gloria Pringle going back six months. No overlapping credit cards. They never even bought gas at the same station or shopped at the same Walmart. They don’t work together. Gloria’s kids didn’t go to his school.”

“So why would Walker send us here?” Amanda indicated the monitors. “He had to know we’d bring an army. He’s practically put Al Qaeda inside that house. I’ve got a helicopter set up two miles from here. Tell me what Walker is playing at.”

“I don’t know,” Will said. “I wish I could tell you. This just feels wrong.”

“Your feelings have always mattered so much to me.” Still, Amanda tapped the mic again. “Major, do you have eyes inside the house?”

“That’s a negative, ma’am. Shades are all pulled. We hear a television. There’s some interference from a microwave.” He paused a moment as he switched to another channel, then back. “We think the daughter’s upstairs. The son and mother appear to be downstairs. No idea where the girlfriend is. Maybe in the basement.”

“What’s on TV?”

If the major thought this was a strange question, he didn’t say. “Sounds like *The View*.”

Amanda sat back in her chair. She steepled her fingers together. It didn’t take her long to form a new plan. She told Will, “Go knock on the door.”

“What?” Will and Faith said in unison.

Amanda spoke into the mic. “Major, I’m sending my agent to the front door. Tell your team to drop back.” She looked up at Will. “Don’t worry. They’ll still be there for cover.”

Will felt a bead of sweat roll down his back. He was pretty sure he was right about this, but he wasn’t sure enough to risk his life.

“Oh, for godsakes.” Amanda pushed herself up from the chair. She threw open the back door and was down the steps by the time Will managed to jump down from the van. She walked across the yard with her head high, ignoring the twenty men surrounding the house. Two steps up to the porch. Another two steps to the front door.

Amanda raised her hand and knocked.

Will waited. He heard laughter inside the house, obviously from the television. A woman’s voice called a jovial, “No, no! Let me get it!”

The bolt slid back. Then the thumb latch turned. The door opened. An attractive woman in her fifties with long dark hair stood in her bathrobe. She smiled at Amanda. Then she saw Will and Faith and her smile faltered.

Then she saw the SWAT team surrounding her house and started screaming.

"Wayne Walker is a lying asshole." Gloria Pringle stabbed her cigarette out in the ashtray, only to grab up her pack for another. "Hell no, I never dated him. He should be so lucky." Her hands shook as she lit a new cigarette. "What were you going to do, bust in here and kill us all?"

Amanda used her diplomatic voice. "We were told the men who were holding you hostage were trained mercenaries."

Gloria laughed out loud. "And you believed that?"

Will let Amanda handle the question. He glanced around the woman's kitchen, which was decorated in a strawberry theme. Strawberry wallpaper. Strawberry curtains. Strawberry tablecloth. Even the canisters on the countertop were shaped like strawberries.

"I don't even know why he bothers to go to church," Gloria said. "Not like he'll get into heaven."

Faith came into the kitchen with three surly-looking young adults in tow. "There's no one else in the house. They all tell the same story. They've been here all morning. They have no idea why Wayne Walker would say they were being held hostage."

"We could sue you," the girl said.

"For?" Amanda asked.

The girl didn't have an answer.

Amanda turned to Gloria. "Why would Wayne target you like this?"

No one spoke, but there was a definite air of guilt among the strawberries.

Finally, the litigious girl spoke up. "Terri used to date Connor."

Will guessed Connor was the young man slumping against the refrigerator. He had the floppy blond hair and boyish good looks of a player.

"I broke up with her," Connor said. "She wanted to get serious, but I was, like, not with you being gone for a whole year. Oh, hell no."

Will provided, "Walker said he wanted Terri to know he was

thinking about her.”

“Thinking about her?” Gloria trilled. “Sending a SWAT team to my house because my son broke up with his daughter?” She waved her cigarette in the air. “Fucking crazy, that’s what this is! Just crazy!”

“Whatever.” Connor started to leave.

Amanda asked, “Where did you say you were this morning, young man?”

“Here.” He indicated the house. “Me and Sheila was sleeping one off.”

“He’s telling the truth,” Gloria said, as if she would offer up her son otherwise. “I checked on them when I got in from work.”

“When was this?”

“Around eight-thirty this morning. I work the night shift at O’Kelley’s.” She sucked on her cigarette. “They’re a parts supplier off Kennedy Road.”

Will asked, “That’s near Exit 40?” The Lil’ Dixie was off 40.

“Yeah, I just missed all that traffic this morning from the holdup.” Her hand stopped a few inches from her face. The cigarette smoldered. “That was Wayne, wasn’t it? That whole thing this morning.”

Amanda asked, “Why do you say that?”

“Because that’s just the kind of asshole stunt he’d pull.”

“You seem to know a lot about him.”

“I got a pair of ears and we go to the same church. He’s probably just as much up in my business as I’m up in his.” She took a hit off the cigarette. “Plus, I dated Wayne’s half brother back in high school. Caused a bit of a stir.” She told her children, “Believe it or not, there was a time when a white woman could get killed for sleeping with a black man.”

“And I’m outta here,” Connor said. He slinked back out of the kitchen with the two girls following close behind.

Will saw the vein in Amanda’s forehead had started to throb. It seemed like she was having trouble speaking. “Wayne Walker has an African American half brother?”

Gloria nodded vigorously. “He lived with his daddy over on the other side of town, but everybody knew.” She played with her lighter, flipping it end over end. “Me and Doug-Ray dated in high school, then he moved to west Georgia to go to college, then he moved back here a couple’a-three years ago. His daddy died

recently. I read about it in the paper. I guess I could've taken off to go to the funeral, but we're on time and a half, you know?"

Will couldn't keep the reluctance out of his voice. "What about Pete McClendon? Do you know him?"

"Pete." Gloria huffed out some smoke. "There's a blast from the past. I don't know how that fool managed to get in uniform. He stole my purse one time when I was over at his aunt's house. We found it under his bed, bless his heart."

No one asked the obvious question, but Gloria was on a roll now.

She explained, "Pete is Wayne's cousin on his mama's side. Now, as I recall, Miss Mina passed away when Pete was a baby, so Wayne's Maw-Maw raised him."

Will got a sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach. "Maw-Maw?"

"That's Mrs. Lewis. I'm sure she has a first name, but I can't remember it." She jabbed her cigarette toward Amanda. "You run across her, you wanna be careful. That woman's nothin' but a spoon. She's always stirring up shit."

Amanda pressed her fingers to her temples. "Samantha Lewis is Wayne Walker's mother?"

"And Doug-Ray's." Gloria laughed out some more smoke. "Which was hilarious, because if you've ever talked to her for even a second, you know she's racist as hell."

"Yes," Will said. "We've talked to her."

"It's not just blacks." Gloria wasn't finished. "She found out one of the teachers at Wayne's school was a lesbian and had her run out on a rail. And it takes a *lot* to get fired from the Clayton County school system."

Faith shook her head, like she needed to clear it. "Where does Billie Lam fit into all of this?"

"That piece of trash?" Gloria stubbed her cigarette out by the others. "Like I said, I haven't talked to any of them in years, but I hear she followed Doug-Ray up here when Wayne got him a job at the school."

Amanda made it clear. "Billie followed Doug-Ray back to Forest Park, not the other way around?"

"What she wanted to do up here is beyond me. Same trailer, different park." Gloria lit another cigarette. "Why are y'all looking at me funny?"

"Billie isn't Maw-Maw's granddaughter?"

She sputtered out smoke as she laughed. "Oh, hell no. Maw-Maw

woulda drowned a girl before she raised her. You think she hates men? You should see what she does to women. I'm not sure why she talked Gilbert into hiring Billie to work at the store, but mark my word, Maw-Maw was working an angle. Don't let her fool you. She's a crafty old bitch."

Will noted an absence of saliva in his mouth.

Faith said, "Gilbert Caldwell is Maw-Maw's son, not his son-in-law?"

"By a different daddy from Wayne and Doug-Ray. Never married none of them, of course." She pursed her lips. "My mama used to say Samantha Lewis had a rocking chair for an ass."

Faith asked, "Did she have any more children?"

"Just the three boys, God bless their souls. And Pete, though like I said, he was her sister's kid."

Amanda pushed herself up from the table. She rarely showed her years, but today was an exception. "Thank you for your time, Ms. Pringle. We'll follow up if we have any more questions. In the meantime, if you hear where Billie might be, we would appreciate a phone call."

"No problem. You'll be the first to know." Gloria walked them toward the door. There was a look of concentration on her face. In Will's experience, the best details always came out when an interview was over. Gloria Pringle was no exception.

"What about the house?" she asked, holding open the front door. "Did ya'll check Doug-Ray's house?"

"Yes," Faith answered. "Doug-Ray's house, Wayne's apartment, Maw-Maw's house."

She didn't mention that Maw-Maw had given them the slip, but Will could tell from the way's Amanda's jaw set as she walked onto the porch that the thought was prominent in her mind.

"What about Arthur's?" Gloria smiled when they all stopped and turned around. "Arthur Pierce. He was a mailman. Died about three months ago." Her smile started to falter. "Y'all know Doug-Ray's daddy left him a house?"

Arthur Pierce had left his son a two-bedroom clapboard house located in a section of Forest Park that bordered Atlanta's Hartsfield-Jackson International Airport. The house wasn't exactly on the runway, but Will felt the need to hunch his shoulders as a Delta jet came in for a landing.

He walked up the driveway on foot. There was a silver Pontiac Firebird parked in front of the closed garage. Will glanced in as he passed, making sure no one was hiding in the back. He headed toward the front porch. Weeds had grown through the cracked concrete, but Will could tell the house had been well maintained until three months ago when Arthur Pierce passed away. And he had really died, because they'd all seen his death certificate, tax returns, property deeds, and records on his closed pension account.

The day's events so far had served as an unwelcome reminder of why they taught you at the academy to verify all witness testimony down to the last detail.

Arthur Pierce was without question deceased. They'd talked to the funeral home that buried him and his friends at the VA who'd been there when he clutched his chest and keeled over onto the poker table. By all accounts, the senior Mr. Pierce was a stand-up guy. He'd been a mailman, which explained why his mailbox was painted dark blue with an American flag on each side. The front door was a matching blue. There was another American flag hanging from a column that held up the small shed roof over the door. The material was tattered from the elements, which Will was glad Mr. Pierce did not have to see.

Will had planned to knock, but the front door was cracked open. He used the toe of his boot to push it the rest of the way. He had Faith's Glock tucked into the back of his pants, but he didn't pull the weapon. Maybe this wasn't exactly wise. Every minute of Will's day had been spent underestimating people.

The house smelled musty and closed up. Doug-Ray hadn't bothered to clear out his father's furniture or mementos, but he'd

availed himself of all the copper in the house. Plaster had been hammered away in chunks. The ceiling looked like the world's largest rat had bounced its way across the beams. Pipes, electrical wire – anything that could be sold for scrap had been removed long ago.

Which didn't explain the coppery smell in the air.

Will felt the hairs on the back of his neck go up. He put his hand on the Glock, but didn't pull it. There was only one thing he could think of that smelled like copper but wasn't copper, and that was congealed blood. Something about the iron hitting oxygen brought about the scent. Every cop had a different description for it, but what it boiled down to was the smell of metal that hooked into the back of your throat like a fishing lure.

He walked through the front room as quietly as he could. Broken plaster littered the floor. The carpet was wet and moldy. There was a hole in the roof somewhere. Doug-Ray had probably talked to a real estate agent and realized very quickly that no one would be interested in buying his father's house. According to the tax records, Arthur Pierce's home was one of only three in the neighborhood that wasn't in the process of foreclosure.

Will peered into the two bedrooms and a tiny hall bath before making his way to the kitchen. Something told him this was where he would find Billie, and he was right. Only, he hadn't anticipated the state in which she would be found.

She was lying on her back in the kitchen doorway. Her bleached blonde hair flowered around her head. Her arms were out, hands open. Her eyes were deep blue. They were also glassy, most likely because of the large kitchen knife sticking out of her chest.

Will stood over the body. He didn't bother to bend down and check her pulse. He didn't want to give Maw-Maw the opportunity to jump him.

The old woman was sitting at the table smoking a joint. She blew on the tip, one eye on Will as he stepped over Billie's body and entered the kitchen.

"She came at me," Maw-Maw said, her voice raspy from the smoke. "I thought she was gonna kill me."

Will looked at the scene. There was some evidence to support a struggle. Kitchen utensils were scattered on the floor. Drawers were open where someone had furiously searched them.

Only, it wasn't just one or two drawers that were open, but every

single drawer in the room. In Will's lengthy experience with stabbings that occurred in the kitchen, he was hard-pressed to think of a case where someone searching for a knife started with the bottom drawers and worked their way up.

Maw-Maw waved at the chair across from her. "Sit down, sonny. Let's talk."

Will reached into his pocket. He took out his iPhone. "I'm going to record this."

"Suit yourself."

"As a police officer, I have to inform you that you're entitled to a lawyer. You have a right—"

"To remain silent, et cetera, et cetera," she interrupted. "I'm eighty-four years old. You think I haven't seen my fair share of *Murder, She Wrote*?"

Will didn't recall Jessica Fletcher ever making an arrest, but for the sake of the recording, he asked, "You're waiving your rights, Ms. Lewis?"

"Yes." She impatiently pointed at the chair. "Now sit."

Will sat. He put the phone on the table between them. The little needle on the readout bounced back and forth as a jet roared overhead.

Will waited for the noise to fade, then asked, "Do you want to tell me what happened?"

Maw-Maw held a lungful of smoke before letting it out. "Poor Billie. She knocked on my kitchen door a while ago. I knew those cops were outside. I tried to get them, but she grabbed me." She showed Will a mark on her wrist where he had no doubt Billie Lam grabbed the old woman, probably to keep the knife from going deeper into her chest. "She took me out the back and brought me here."

"That's her car in the driveway?"

"Gilbert's," Maw-Maw provided. "He let her drive it to work. That's just the sort she was. Give her an inch and she takes a mile."

"Was Gilbert the third man at the gas station today?"

She gave him a disappointed look. "You're getting ahead of yourself."

Will held out his open hand, indicating she should continue spinning her defense.

"I tried to help that sweet girl. Got her a job at the store. Took her into my home. And then she drags me here. Holds that very

knife to my neck and tells me she wants all my money.” She inhaled deeply. “I don’t know how it happened. I managed to get the knife somehow. I wasn’t going to hurt her. I just held it out in front of me, and she ran toward me, and...” Her voice trailed off. She gave Will a cat’s smile. “Poor little thing. She was so young.”

“You said she was your granddaughter.”

“Well.” The smile still played at her lips. “She was just as good as. That girl felt like family. All I ever wanted to do was protect her.”

“Like you were trying to protect your sons?” Will leaned forward. “Wayne Walker and Doug-Ray Pierce.”

“Both dead,” she told Will. “I heard it on the news. Wayne died half an hour ago. Bless both their hearts.”

Will hadn’t heard about Walker, but he wasn’t surprised. “You don’t seem too broken up that two of your children are dead.”

“Wayne was sick for a long time with the cancer.” She blinked, and he wondered whether her moist eyes were for show. “He was an asshole, but he was my asshole.”

“And Pete McClendon?”

“Sweet, but stupid.” She chuckled as she took another hit from the joint. “So stupid.”

“He was robbing businesses on his own beat. We talked to the detectives on the case. They were about to arrest him.”

“I told him he’d get caught eventually – don’t shit where you eat – but that boy was a shit-eater from the day he was born.”

“What about the store today?”

She set the joint down on the edge of the table. Will watched it smolder against the linoleum. Her hand shook as she reached out to the phone. She was better at working the device than Will. A series of swipes turned off the recorder, then she pressed the button and powered it down.

She put the phone back on the table and picked up the joint.

She said, “It was Wayne’s idea. He knew he was dying, wanted to go out with a bang. Fly to Vegas, get some hookers.” She lowered her voice. “Let’s be honest, nobody was gonna sleep with that asshole unless they was gettin’ paid for it.”

Will had to take a moment to digest her words. It was very convenient that Wayne couldn’t dispute the charge. “What about Doug-Ray?”

“He was following Wayne’s lead. That’s just how they are, isn’t it? Always looking for the fast score, too lazy to make it happen on

their own. I told him it would get him killed one day.” She puffed out a cloud of smoke. “Men never listen to reason.”

“Did you know Wayne was going to kill Doug-Ray?”

“They were brothers, but they never got along.” She added, “And Arthur’s pension from the post office died with him, so what’s the point?”

Will had always thought being able to live your life was a good point. “There was only a thousand bucks in that cash register.”

“A thousand twelve,” she corrected. “Never lie about money, son.”

Will shook his head. He still didn’t understand, and he wasn’t too proud to admit it. “All of this for a little over a thousand dollars?”

“Anybody ever tell you you’re just about as ignorant as a goat?”

Will didn’t respond. Amanda often compared him to farm animals. “What’s in it for you, Maw-Maw? I don’t get it.”

“Well, let me walk you through it, boy.” She counted off on her fingers. “Wayne got fired, but he’s still got his pension and life insurance policy through the school. Doug-Ray has about the same, but Pete’s the jackpot. A hundred thousand dollars for being killed in the line of duty. And happened just in time, I guess, if those detectives were as close as you say to locking him up.” She seemed pleased with herself. “I’m next of kin with his mama and daddy gone.”

“Pete’s not dead.”

“Yet.” She shrugged. “If he makes it, he’ll get disability. The investigation will go away – let’s be real, the county doesn’t need another scandal on top of the pile. I guess I’ll have to take care of little Petey again.” The wink she gave Will suggested what kind of caregiver she planned on being. “Poor boy.”

“What about Billie?”

Maw-Maw’s face twisted in disgust. “She pulled a baby-daddy scam on Doug-Ray. I saw it coming a mile away, but he was blind to anything had more than one hole between the legs. That girl was about as pregnant as I was. I let her live with me so I could keep an eye on her. She spun some story about losing the baby. Of course, I couldn’t kick her out after that. I’m a Christian.”

“You needed her as a witness,” Will realized. “The store really had to be robbed. She had to back up Pete’s line-of-duty death.”

“Which she would’ve done if everything hadn’t gone to hell.”

Will floated his theory. “Doug-Ray and Pete weren’t meant to

survive the robbery. Shooting Pete in the chest wasn't an accident. Neither was shooting Doug-Ray in the head."

"Wayne had one foot in the grave. The melanoma was gonna take him in a few months. I told you, he never much liked Doug-Ray, and Pete always got more poon than he did, which can grate on a man. I'm sure you get where I'm coming from. Every single one'a y'all walk whichever way your compass needle points you."

Will had to say, "For the mother of three sons, you really seem to hate men."

"What can I tell ya? I've known too many of them to think otherwise. Present company excluded, of course."

Will doubted he was an exception. Hate radiated off her like the heat lamp over the nachos at the Lil' Dixie.

He thought of something that hadn't stuck out before. "The surveillance camera was angled to the back of the store. Billie's testimony about the robbery would've been the only thing the police had to go on."

"Which would've worked great if the little bitch hadn't run out the back screaming her head off. Took everything I had in me to keep her from going to the police." She soured her face. "You don't think I wanted to be up there this morning pretending like I saw the whole thing."

Will was fairly certain Maw-Maw had seen a great deal. He asked, "What kept her from turning all of you in?"

"Money," she said. "I threw the bag of cash on the roof of the store. Near about shocked me to death that y'all didn't look up there."

Will could only imagine the words Amanda would have for the agents who missed this. "Billie was supposed to get the proceeds from the holdup."

"Now you've got it."

"And Gilbert?"

"He's the only one'a them ever added up to anything." Her words were kind, but her expression said otherwise. "Not that that's much, considering."

"Where is he?"

"Dead eight days. Slipped and fell at the store. Cracked his head open like a walnut." She shook her head. "I swear to God, if I'd known the police was this stupid, I woulda planned this whole thing a lot different."

The woman had a point. Gilbert's accident had happened in Clayton County. His death would've been investigated by the GBI medical examiner's office. The autopsy report was probably making its way through the system.

"Poor Gil," Maw-Maw said. "Little shit couldn't run a business to save his life. Or my life, which is the part that matters. The whole damn place was falling down. Mortgaged out the wah-hoo. And then I find out he put my house up as collateral. I was gonna lose everything." She pointed her finger in Will's direction. "I'll tell you what I told Billie: ain't nothing you can get from a man that you can't get better from a dog and a jar of peanut butter."

Will felt light-headed.

She threw back her head and laughed. "Shut your mouth before you catch some flies, boy. I may be old as dirt, but I still got some life left in me."

Will tasted blood in his mouth. His teeth had cut open the inside of his cheek.

"That it?" She pressed her hand to the table, making to stand.

"Sit down." Will stopped thinking about what she'd said and concentrated on what she'd done. Her sons were dead – two of them by violent means; God only knew what had happened to the other. The boy she had raised was clinging to his life at the hospital. Billie Lam lay dead on the floor with a knife in her heart.

And Maw-Maw was certain she was going to get away with it.

Will reached for the phone. She clamped her hand over his. She was fast when she wanted to be. He could feel the sandpapery rub of her skin as he pulled his hand away.

He said, "The robbery was your idea, not Wayne's."

One shoulder went up in a shrug. The motion was almost lost under her loose-fitting dress. Will wondered what else she had under there. Faith's earlier warning still echoed in his brain. He'd been played like a fiddle by this woman from the moment they'd met. Will took out his gun and put it on the table in front of him. His hand stayed on the grip.

"Well." She glanced down at the Glock. "That changes the tone."

"You're the reason they're dead. Wayne, Doug-Ray, maybe Pete. Certainly Billie."

She stubbed the end of the joint out on the table. "I only got a few years left. I'm not gonna end up spending them in some damn state-run nursing home stewing in my own piss."

"You sacrificed all those lives so you could enjoy your retirement?"

"I've earned it." She shrugged again, this time with both shoulders. "Two, maybe three less men walking the planet. As far as I'm concerned, I've done the world a favor."

"Not all men are bad."

She snorted, as if he'd told her a really bad joke. "You'd put me in jail if you could."

"Prison," he told her. "Jail is where you await trial. Prison is where you go after you're sentenced."

"You gonna put my picture in *Busted*?" She laughed at his surprise. "I work at a convenience store, numbnuts. We look at that thing every week to see how many customers are in it."

"I'm going to make sure you're the centerfold."

"You'd have to be a hell of a lot smarter than you come across."

Will leaned in closer. Maw-Maw did the same, like they were about to throw it down and arm-wrestle.

He said, "You've been lying to the police all day."

"I did what I had to do."

"You lied to the police about working at the store this morning."

"Yep."

"You lied to the police about being Billie's grandmother."

"Uh-huh."

"You lied to the police about your sons being involved in the robbery."

"I did."

"You lied to the police about being in the back of the Chevy this morning."

She smiled.

"I know that was you." Will recalled the shambling departure the third robber had made from the back of the truck. It wasn't the case of a man being covert. It was the case of an old woman trying not to break a bone.

He said, "You went to the back of the store to wait for Billie. You were there to make sure she didn't run."

She shrugged. "Girl never had much of a spine."

"You've been obstructing this investigation from the beginning."

"Yes, I suppose you're right." She employed her patented one-shoulder shrug. "Am I supposed to be sorry?"

"You killed Billie."

She moved back in the chair. She was cocky, but she knew she was talking to a police officer. "That was clearly self-defense."

Will narrowed his eyes. "Is it clear?"

"I'll get a good lawyer," she told him. "I've recently come into some family money."

"You even lied about things that didn't matter. Gilbert wasn't Jewish."

"He was never circumcised." She snorted with disgust. "I suppose Obamacare will take care of that."

Will refused to let her sidetrack him. "Why lie? Why lie to the police for no reason?"

"Because I can," she answered, like it was simple. "Because it's fun. Because watching y'all spin around chasing your tails all day has been the most entertainment I've had in ages." She gave a rascally chuckle. "If that's a crime, then arrest me."

"Okay." Will stood up. He pulled a set of handcuffs out of his back pocket. "Please stand."

"What are you doing?"

"Samantha Lewis, I'm placing you under arrest."

"What the hell for?" She was talking tough, but there was genuine concern in her eyes. "You can't prove I had anything to do with that robbery. You can't prove what happened with Billie was anything but self-defense."

"You're probably right," Will allowed. "But I'm absolutely certain I can prove you lied to the police. That's a felony, Mrs. Lewis. Each instance carries a five-year prison sentence. By my count, you just admitted to it four times, plus copped to willfully obstructing an investigation." He matched her hillbilly cadence. "Did you not know all that's illegal?"

"What the—" She tried to stand, nearly knocking over the chair in the process. "I didn't—"

"You did." Will reached into his shirt and pulled out the microphone that was clipped to the inside of his collar. "And you admitted to doing all of it on tape." He hoped there was a twinkle in his eye when he smiled. "Thanks for waiving your rights, by the way."

"I turned that off!" she screamed. The effort nearly knocked the wind out of her. She gripped the counter for support. "You bastard! I'll cut off your balls and feed them to the pigs!"

Will opened the kitchen door. Faith was standing there. He had

done a lot of outlandish things today – wasted twelve minutes waiting on an Icee, chased after a murderer without a gun or backup, jumped from a speeding motorcycle – but he didn't have it in him to handcuff an eighty-four-year-old woman, no matter how detestable her crimes. Besides, her wrists were too thin for the cuffs.

Faith said, "Samantha Lewis, you have the right to remain silent."

"Go to hell."

"Please exercise your right to remain silent." Faith tried to grab the old woman's hands. "You have a right to an attorney."

Maw-Maw slapped her away like she was swatting flies. Faith was not deterred. She held both of the woman's wrists in one hand. With her free hand, she pulled out a plastic zip tie. Will saw Faith wince as the plastic cut against the woman's thin skin.

"Idiots!" Maw-Maw said. "They won't convict me! I'm just an old woman! I won't spend a day behind bars!"

"Our boss is with the state prosecutor right now," Faith told her. "You know we're with the state, right? The jury for your trial won't be from Forest Park."

Maw-Maw's mouth opened as she sucked air.

Faith continued, "Believe it or not, Georgia is cracking down on people who lie to the police. The attorney general plans on making an example of you."

"That's not true!" Maw-Maw's voice had a pleading tone to it. "You watch. There's not a jury alive who'll convict me. I was protecting my family! Anybody would do that!"

"We'll see in a year or so," Faith said. "That's about how long this will take to come to trial. Unless you have somebody who'll bail you out? Maybe a family member?"

Maw-Maw's mouth gaped open and closed. Will could almost see the wheels turning in her head. She mistook his attention for an opening, telling him, "What I said before – I told you, sonny, I got dementia. I can't remember things. I was under the influence of drugs. I got Alzheimer's"

"Keep practicing for the trial." Faith pressed her hand to Maw-Maw's shoulder to get her moving. "Maybe some of the girls at the jail can help you."

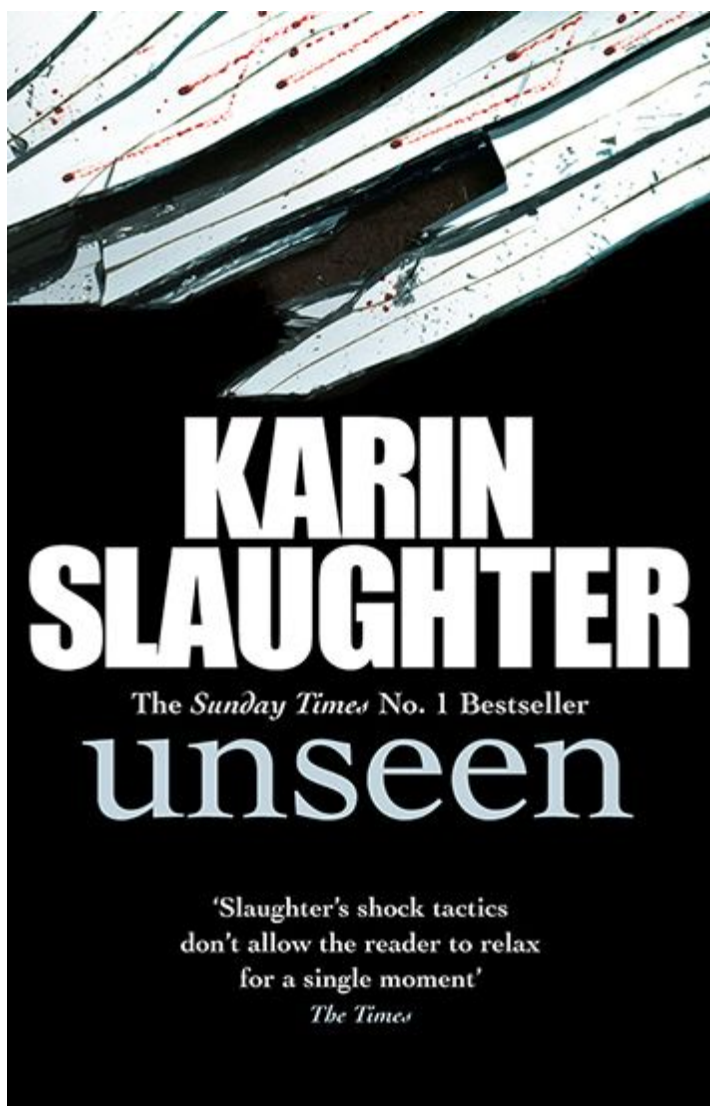
Will smiled as warmly as he could. "I hear they love meeting new people."

"No!" Maw-Maw lunged for Will. She grabbed his shirt in her fists. "You fucking bastard! You can't send me to jail! I can't live out

my life with a bunch of dykes!”

Will carefully pried her bony fingers from his shirt. “Don’t worry,” he told the old woman. “I hear they taste just like peanut butter.”

If you enjoyed *Busted*, look out for *Unseen*, Karin Slaughter's gripping new novel featuring Special Agent Will Trent, coming in hardcover and ebook in July 2013.



Special Agent Will Trent has something to hide.

Something he doesn't want Dr Sara Linton – the woman he loves – to find out.

He's gone undercover in Macon, Georgia and put his life at risk.
And he knows Sara will never forgive him if she discovers the truth.

But when a young Macon patrolman is shot and left for dead Sara is
forced to confront the past and a woman she hoped never to see
again. And without even knowing it, she becomes involved in the
same case Will is working on.

Soon both of their lives are in danger.

Read on for an extract...

CHAPTER ONE

WEDNESDAY, MACON GEORGIA

Detective Lena Adams winced as she pulled off her T-shirt. She took her police badge out of her pocket, along with her flashlight and an extra clip for her Glock, and tossed them all onto the dresser. The time on her phone showed it was almost midnight. Lena had rolled out of bed eighteen hours ago and now all she wanted to do was fall back in. Not that she'd done that much lately. For the past four days, just about every waking hour had been wasted sitting at a conference room table answering questions she'd answered the day before and the day before that – navigating the usual bullshit that came from having to justify your actions to Internal Affairs.

'Who led the raid into the house?'

'What intelligence were you acting on?'

'What did you expect to find?'

The internal investigator for the Macon Police Department had the dour, lifeless personality of a career pencil pusher. Every day, the woman showed up dressed in the same style black skirt and white blouse, an outfit that seemed more appropriate for greeting diners at an Olive Garden. She nodded a lot, frowned even more as she took notes. When Lena didn't answer quickly, she'd check the tape recorder to make sure it was picking up the silences.

Lena was certain most of the questions were designed to provoke an outburst. The first day, Lena had been so numb that she'd just answered truthfully in the hope that it would soon be over. The second and third days, she'd been less forthcoming, her level of irritation rising with each passing minute. Today, she had finally exploded, which seemed exactly what the woman had been waiting for.

'What do you think I expected to find, you miserable bitch?'

If only Lena hadn't found it. If only she could take a razor and slice the images out of her brain. They haunted her. They flickered into her vision like an old movie every time she blinked. They filled her with a constant, unrelenting sorrow.

Lena started to rub her eyes, then thought better of it. Six days had passed since she'd led her team on the raid, but her body was still a walking reminder of what had happened. The bruise fingering its way across her nose and underneath her left eye had turned a urine-yellow. The three stitches holding together the cut in her scalp itched like a rash.

Then there were the things that no one could see – Lena's bruised tailbone. Her aching back and knees. The roil in her stomach every time she thought about what she'd discovered in that desolate house in the woods.

Four dead bodies. One man still in the hospital. Another who might never wear the badge again. Not to mention the terrible memory she would probably end up taking to her grave.

Tears came into Lena's eyes. She bit her lip, fighting the urge to let the grief have its way. She was exhausted. The week had been hard. Hell, the last three weeks had been hard. But it was over now. All of it was over. Lena was safe. She would keep her job. The rat squad investigator had scurried back to her hole. Lena was finally home where no one could stare at her, question her, probe and prod her. It wasn't just Internal Affairs. Everyone wanted to know what the raid had been like, what Lena had found in that dark, dank basement.

And Lena wanted nothing more than to forget all about it.

Her cell phone chirped. Lena exhaled until her lungs were completely empty. The phone chirped a second time. She picked it up. There was a new text message.

VICKERY: u ok?

Lena stared at the words. Paul Vickery, her partner.

She tapped reply. Her thumb hovered over the keyboard.

The distant rumble of a motorcycle shook the air.

Instead of typing out a response, Lena held down the power button until the phone turned off. She placed it on the dresser beside her badge.

The roar of the Harley D's twin-cam engine vibrated in her ears as Jared gunned the bike so he could make it to the top of their steep driveway. Lena waited, following the familiar sounds: the engine cutting, the metallic groan of the kickstand, the heavy tread of boots as her husband made his way into the house, tossed his helmet and keys onto the kitchen table even though she'd asked him a million times not to. He paused for a moment, probably to check

the mail, then continued toward their bedroom.

Lena kept her back to the door as she counted off Jared's footsteps down the long hallway. His stride sounded tentative, reluctant. He'd probably been hoping Lena would be asleep.

Jared stopped at the doorway. He was obviously waiting for Lena to turn around. When she didn't, he asked, 'You just get in?'

'I stayed late to finish.' It wasn't a complete lie. She'd hoped Jared would be asleep, too. 'I was about to take a shower.'

'All right.'

Lena didn't go into the bathroom. Instead, she turned to face him.

Jared's gaze flickered down to her bra, then quickly back up again. He was dressed in his uniform, his hair twisted into a peak from the helmet. He was a cop with the Macon PD, too – a motorman, one rank below Lena and twelve years younger. Neither one of these things used to bother her, but lately, everything in their lives was a provocation.

He leaned against the doorjamb, asking, 'How'd it go?'

'They cleared me to go back to work.'

'That's good, right?'

She replayed his words in her head, trying to decipher the tone.

'Why wouldn't it be?'

Jared didn't respond. There was a long, uncomfortable silence before he asked, 'You want a drink?'

Lena couldn't hide her surprise.

'I guess it's okay now, right?' He tilted his head to the side, forced his lips into a tight smile. He was a few inches taller than Lena, but his muscular frame and athletic grace made him seem larger.

Usually.

Jared cleared his throat to let her know that he was waiting.

She nodded. "Kay."

Jared left the room, but his need lingered – surrounding her, almost suffocating her. He *needed* for Lena to break down. He *needed* for her to lean on him. He *needed* her to show him that what happened had affected her, had altered her in some tangible way.

He couldn't see that not giving in was the only thing that kept her from falling completely apart.

Lena took her pajamas out of the dresser. She heard Jared moving around the kitchen. He opened the freezer door, rummaged around for a handful of ice. Lena closed her eyes. Her body swayed. She waited for the cubes to hit glass. Her mouth watered in anticipation.

She clenched her jaw. Forced open her eyes.

She wanted the drink too badly. When Jared came back, she would put the glass down, wait a few minutes, prove to herself that she could do without it.

Prove to him that she didn't need it.

Her hands ached as she unbuttoned her jeans. The day of the raid, she'd gripped her shotgun so hard that her fingers had felt like they were permanently curled. She wasn't sure why everything still ached. She should be better now, but her body was holding onto the hurt. Holding on to the poison that was eating her up inside.

'So.' Jared was back. This time, he came into the room. He poured a large vodka as he walked toward her, the bottle gurgling as the liquid splashed into the glass. 'You're back on duty tomorrow?'

'First thing.'

He handed her the glass. 'No time off?'

Lena took the drink and downed half of it in one gulp.

'I guess that's the same as when...' His voice trailed off. He didn't have to say when. Instead, he looked out the back window. The dark panes showed his reflection. 'I bet you get your sergeant's stripes off this.'

She shook her head, but said, 'Maybe.'

He stared at her – waiting. Needing.

She asked, 'What are they saying at the station?'

Jared walked to the closet. 'That you've got balls of steel.' He dialed the combination on the gun safe. Lena watched the back of his neck. There was a pink line of sunburn where his helmet didn't protect the skin. He must've known she was watching, but he just took his holster off his belt and stored his gun beside hers. Near hers. He didn't even let their guns touch.

She asked, 'Does it bother you?'

He shut the safe door, spun the combination. 'Why would it bother me?'

Lena didn't say the words, but they were screaming in her head: *Because they think I'm tougher than you. Because your wife was tracking down some very bad guys while you were toodling around on your bike giving tickets to soccer moms.*

Jared said, 'I'm proud of you.' He used his reasonable voice, the one that made Lena want to punch him in the face. 'They should give you a medal for what you did.'

He had no idea what she'd done. Jared only knew the highlights, the details Lena was allowed to share outside closed doors.

She repeated the question. 'Does it bother you?'

He paused for a second too long. 'It bothers me that you could've been killed.'

He still hadn't answered the question. Lena studied his face. The skin was still unlined, fresh. She'd met Jared when he was twenty-one, and in the five and a half years since, he'd somehow started looking younger, like he was aging in reverse. Or maybe Lena was getting older more quickly. So much had changed since those early days. In the beginning, she could always tell what he was thinking. Of course, since then, she'd given him plenty of mortar to build up a wall around himself.

He started unbuttoning his shirt. 'I think I'm gonna put those cabinets together.'

She gave a startled laugh. 'Really?' The kitchen had been torn apart for three months, mostly because Jared found a new reason every weekend to not work on it.

He let his shirt drop to the floor. 'At least Ikea will know I'm still the man of the house.'

Now that it was out there, Lena didn't know how to respond. 'You know it's not like that.' Even to her own ears, the excuse sounded weak. 'It's just not.'

'Really?'

Lena didn't answer.

'Right.' Jared's cell phone started to ring. He pulled it out of his pocket, checked the number, and declined the call.

'That your girlfriend?' Lena didn't like the thinness in her tone. The joke wasn't funny. They both knew that.

He rummaged through the dirty-clothes basket and found his jeans, one of his T-shirts.

'It's almost midnight.' Lena looked at the bedside clock. 'Past midnight.'

'I'm not sleepy.' He dressed quickly, tucking his phone into his back pocket. 'I'll keep the noise down.'

'You need your phone to put the cabinets together?'

'The charge is low.'

'Jared -'

'It won't take long to finish.' He smiled that fake smile again. 'Least I can do, right?'

Lena smiled back, holding up her glass in a toast.

He didn't leave. 'You should get in the shower before you fall down.'

She nodded, but couldn't stop her eyes taking in the way the T-shirt clung to his chest, followed the definition of his abs. The vodka had given her a nice buzz. Her body was finally starting to relax. There was something about the way Jared was standing that brought old memories rushing back. Lena let her mind wander to a place she usually kept blocked off – the town where she'd lived before she moved with Jared to Macon, the city where she'd first learned how to be a cop.

Back in Grant County, Jared's father had taught Lena everything she knew about being a police officer. Well, almost everything. Lena had a feeling the tricks she'd learned after Jeffrey Tolliver's death would've pissed him the hell off. For all the times he crossed the line, Jeffrey sure came down hard on Lena whenever he caught her skipping near it.

'Lee?' Jared asked. He had Jeffrey's eyes, the same way of tilting his head to the side while he was waited for her to answer him.

Lena finished the drink, though her head was swimming. 'I love you.'

It was Jared's turn to give a startled laugh.

She asked, 'Aren't you going to say you love me back?'

'Do you want me to?'

She didn't answer.

He gave a resigned sigh as he walked over to her. She was dressed in nothing but her bra and underwear, but he kissed her on the forehead the same way he did with his sister. 'Don't fall asleep in the shower.'

Lena watched him go. He'd been wearing the same dirty T-shirt a lot lately. There were spots of yellow paint on the back and shoulders from where he'd started remodeling the spare bedroom three weeks ago.

Lena had told him not to paint the walls, to wait another few weeks – not because he had at least ten other projects in the house that needed to be finished first, but because it was bad luck.

Jared never listened to her.

Of course, she never listened to him, either.

Lena took the vodka bottle with her into the bathroom. She put the empty glass on the back of the toilet and drank straight from the

bottle, her head tilting back. Probably not wise considering the pain pills she'd taken as soon as she walked through the front door, but Lena wasn't feeling particularly smart at the moment. She wanted the amnesia to come. She wanted the pills and the alcohol to erase everything from her mind – what had happened before the raid, during the raid, after. She wanted it all blanked out so that she could lie down and see darkness instead of that silent flickering movie that had haunted her for the last six days.

She put the bottle down on the back of the toilet. Her fingers felt thick as she pinned up her hair. Lena stared at her reflection in the mirror. There were dark circles under her eyes, and not just from the bruise. She pressed her fingers to the glass. Her face was starting to show the things she'd lost.

The number of bodies she'd left in her wake.

Lena looked down. Without realizing, she had pressed her palm to her flat stomach. As recently as nine days ago, there had been the beginning of a swell. Her pants had been tight. Her breasts had been sore. Jared hadn't been able to stop himself from touching her. Sometimes, Lena would wake up and find his hand resting on her belly, as if he was laying claim to what he'd created. The life he'd put inside of her.

But of course it didn't stay there. His hand couldn't stop the wrenching pain that had ripped Lena from a deep sleep. His words couldn't comfort her as the blood flowed. In the bathroom. At the hospital. On the drive home. It was a red ride that left nothing but death in its wake.

And every time she walked by that fucking spare bedroom with its bright yellow walls, she was gripped by such a cold hate for him that she shivered with rage.

Lena stared up at the ceiling. She held her breath for a moment before letting it whisper out like a dark secret. Everything was getting to her today. The loss, the grief. The vodka and pills weren't helping. Would never help enough.

She searched for the cap to the bottle, but couldn't find it. Lena pulled open the door. The bedroom was empty. Jared's clothes were on the floor, exactly where they'd dropped when he took them off. Lena picked up his shirt. She smelled exhaust from the road, sweat and grease from riding all day. His pants still had his wallet in the back pocket. She took it out and put it on the bedside table. His front pockets were full. A handful of change. A small tin of Burt's

beeswax to keep his lips from getting windburned. A couple of twenties, his driver's license, and three credit cards, all held together by a green rubber band. A small, black velvet pouch that he kept his wedding ring in.

Lena dug her finger inside the pouch and pulled out the gold ring. Jared had stopped wearing it to work after one of his buddies had wiped out on his bike. The man's wedding ring had caught on his knuckle and ripped the skin off like a sock. After that, Lena had made Jared promise not to wear his ring while he was riding. The black pouch was a compromise. She'd told him to leave the ring at home, but her husband was romantic – much more than any woman Lena had ever met – and he didn't like the idea of being without it.

She assumed now that he carried it around out of habit.

Lena returned the ring to the pouch and opened Jared's wallet. She'd given it to him their first year together, and he still carried it despite the fact that he'd never used a wallet before. It was really nothing more than a portable photo album. Lena thumbed past the many candid shots Jared had taken over the last five years: Lena in front of their house on the day they moved in, Lena on his bike, Jared and Lena at Disney World, a Braves game, the SEC play-offs, the national championship in Arizona.

She stopped on the photo from their wedding, which had taken place in a judge's chambers inside the Atlanta courthouse. Lena's uncle Hank stood on one side of her, Jared on the other. Beside him were his mother, stepfather, sister, grandmother, grandfather, two cousins, and an elementary school teacher who'd always kept in touch.

Everyone was dressed up but Lena, who was in a navy pantsuit she normally wore to work. Her hair was down, the brown curls hanging past her shoulders. She'd had her makeup done at the Lenox Macy's counter by a transexual who'd gone on and on about her skin tone. At least one woman had appreciated Lena that day. The sour look on Jared's mother's face explained why the groom hadn't insisted on a more formal affair. Somewhere right now in Alabama, Darnell Long was praying that her son would come to his senses and divorce the bitch he'd married.

Sometimes Lena wondered if she held on to Jared solely to spite the woman.

She flipped to the next picture, and her knees felt shaky.

Lena sat down on the bed.

She had seen the photo many times, just not in Jared's wallet. It was from the shoebox Lena kept in the closet. The picture was of her twin sister, Sibyl. Lena was struck by a painful ache of jealousy, and then she felt herself start to laugh. Jared obviously thought the picture was of Lena. He'd never met Sibyl. She'd been dead ten years when Jared came into Lena's life.

She put her hand to her mouth as the laugh turned into a sob. When Lena had found out she was pregnant, the first person she'd thought of was Sibyl. There was a brief spark of happiness as Lena had picked up the phone to call her sister.

And then the loss had sucker punched her in the chest.

Lena carefully wiped underneath her eyes as she stared at the photo. She could see why Jared had chosen it. Sibyl was sitting on a blanket in the park. Her mouth was open, head tilted back. She was laughing with full abandon – the kind of happiness Lena seldom showed. Their Mexican American grandmother's genes were on full display. Sibyl's skin was bronze from the sun. Her curly brown hair was down, the way Lena wore her hair today. Though Sibyl didn't have the highlights Lena had, and she certainly didn't have the few strands of gray.

What would Sibyl look like now? It was a question Lena had asked a lot over the years. She assumed it was something all twins wondered when one passed away. Sibyl had never had Lena's hard lines and sharp edges. There was always a softness to Sibyl's face, an openness that invited people in instead of pushing them away. Only a fool would mistake one twin for the other.

'Lee?'

She looked up at Jared as if it was perfectly normal for her to be sitting in her underwear crying over his wallet. He was standing in the doorway again, feet just shy of entering.

She asked, 'Who was that call from? On your cell phone?'

'The number was blocked.' He looped his thumbs through his tool belt as he leaned against the doorjamb. 'You all right?'

'I'm ... uh...' Her voice caught. 'Tired.'

Lena looked at Sibyl one last time before she closed the wallet. She felt tears streaming down her face. Her jaw tightened as she tried to push her emotions back down. No matter what she did, they kept bubbling up again, tightening her throat, squeezing like a band around her chest.

'Lee?' He still didn't come into the room.

Lena shook her head, willing him to go. She couldn't look at him, couldn't let Jared see her like this. She knew that breaking down was exactly what he'd been waiting for. Expecting.

Wanting.

But then something snapped inside of her. Another sob came out – deep, mournful. Lena couldn't fight it anymore, couldn't keep pushing him away. She didn't make Jared to come to her. She crossed the room quickly, wrapping her arms around his shoulders, pressing her face to his chest.

'Lena –'

She kissed him. Her hands went to his face, touched his neck. Jared resisted at first, but he was a twenty-six-year-old man who'd spent the last week sleeping on the couch. It didn't take much for Lena to get a response. His calloused hands rubbed along her bare back. He pulled her closer, kissed her harder.

And then his whole body jerked away.

Blood sprayed into her mouth.

Lena heard the gunshot seconds later.

After Jared had been hit. After he collapsed against her.

He was too heavy. Lena stumbled, falling back onto the floor, Jared sprawled on top of her, pinning her down. She couldn't move. She tried to push him up, but another shot rang out. His body spasmed, lifting a few inches, then falling against her again.

Lena heard a high-pitched keening. It was coming from her own mouth. She scrambled out from under Jared, then grabbed him by his shirt to pull him out of the line of fire. She managed to move him a few feet before his tool belt got twisted up in the rug.

'No-no-no,' Lena stuttered before she clamped her hands over her mouth to stop the noise. She pressed her back to the wall, fighting a wave of hysteria. The vodka and pills caught up with her. Vomit roiled into the back of her throat. She wanted to scream. Needed to scream.

But she couldn't.

Jared wasn't moving. The noise from the gun still rang in her ears. Shotgun blast. The pellets had scattered, penetrating his back, his head. Bright red circles of blood spread into the dried yellow paint on his T-shirt. A screwdriver from his tool belt was jammed into his side. More blood was pooling underneath his body. She put her hand on his leg, felt the lean muscle of his calf.

'Jared?' she whispered. 'Jared?'

His eyes stayed closed. Blood bubbled from his lips. His fingers quivered against the floor. She could see the tan line where he'd been wearing his wedding ring even though he promised her he wouldn't.

Lena reached for his hand, then pulled back.

Footsteps.

The shooter was walking down the hallway. Slowly. Methodically. He was wearing boots. She could hear the echo of the wooden heel hitting the bare floorboards, then the softer scrape of the toe.

One step.

Another.

Silence.

The shooter raked back the shower curtain in the hall bathroom.

Lena's eyes scanned the bedroom: The guns were locked in the safe. Her cell phone was on the other side of the room. They didn't have a landline. The window was too out in the open. The bathroom was a deathtrap.

Jared's cell phone.

She ran her hand up his leg, checked his pockets. Empty. Empty. They were all empty.

The footsteps resumed, echoing down the hallway, the sound like twigs snapping.

And then –nothing.

He'd stopped outside the first bedroom. Two desks. Boxes of old case files. Jared always left the closet door open. The shooter could see it from the hallway.

He cleared his throat and spat on the floor.

He wanted Lena to know that he was coming.

She pressed her back against the wall, forced herself to stand up. She wasn't going to be sitting down when she died. She was going to be on her feet, fighting for her life, her husband's life.

The footsteps stopped again. The shooter was checking the next bedroom. Bright yellow walls. Closet door laid across a pair of sawhorses so Jared could paint balloons on it. From the hallway, you could see the thin pencil lines where he'd sketched them freehand. You could also see straight back inside the empty closet.

The shooter continued down the hall.

Lena's hand shook as she reached down to Jared. The hammer on his belt was already halfway out of its metal loop. She used her

fingers to push it the rest of the way. Her hand wrapped around the grip. It felt warm, almost hot, against her skin.

Jared's eyelids fluttered opened. He watched Lena as she stood up, pressed her back against the wall again. There was a glassy look to his gaze. Pain. Intense pain. It cut right through her. His mouth moved. Lena put her finger to her lips, willing him to be quiet, to play dead so that he wouldn't get shot again.

The footsteps stopped just shy of the bedroom door, maybe five feet away. The man's shadow preceded him into the room, casting half of Jared's body into darkness.

Lena turned the hammer around so that the claw was facing out. She heard the pump of a shotgun. The sound had its intended effect. She had to lock her knees so she didn't fall to the floor.

The shooter paused. His shadow wavered slightly, but didn't encroach farther into the room.

Lena tensed, counting off the seconds. One, two, three. The man did not enter. He was just standing there.

She tried to put herself in the shooter's head, figure out what he was thinking. Two cops. Both with guns they hadn't used. One was on the floor. The other hadn't moved, hadn't shot back, hadn't screamed or jumped out the window or charged him.

Lena's ears strained in the silence as they both waited.

Finally, the shooter took another step forward – short, tentative. Then another. The tip of the shotgun's barrel was the first thing Lena saw. Sawed off. The metal was rough-cut, freshly hewn. There was a pause, a slight adjustment as the shooter pivoted to the side. Lena saw that the hand supporting the barrel was tattooed. A black skull and crossbones filled the webbing between the thumb and forefinger.

One last, careful step.

Lena two-handed the hammer and swung it into the man's face.

The claw sank into his eye socket. She heard the crunch of bone as the sharpened steel splintered a path into his skull. The shotgun went off, blasting a hole in the wall. Lena tried to pull out the hammer for another blow, but the claw was caught in his head. The man staggered, tried to brace himself against the door. His fingers wrapped around her wrist. Blood poured from his eye, ran down into his mouth, down his neck.

That was when Lena saw the second man. He was running down the hallway, a Smith and Wesson five-shot in his hand. Lena yanked

on the hammer, using it like a handle to jerk the shooter in front of her, to use him as a shield. Three shots popped off in rapid succession; the shooter's body absorbed each hit. Lena gave him a hard shove backward into the second assailant. Both men stumbled. The S&W skittered across the floor.

Lena scooped up the shotgun. She pulled the trigger, but the shell was jammed. She tried the pump, worked to clear the chamber as the second guy climbed his way up to standing. He lunged for her, fingers grazing the muzzle of the gun before he fell to one knee.

Jared had grabbed his ankle. He held on tight, his arm shaking from the effort. The man reared back, started to bring down his fist on Jared's head.

Lena flipped the shotgun around, grabbed it by the barrel and swung it like a bat at the man's head. Blood and teeth sprayed as his jaw snapped loose. He crashed to the floor.

'Jared!' Lena screamed, dropping down beside him. 'Jared!'

He moaned. Blood dribbled from his mouth. His stare was blank, unseeing.

'It's okay,' she told him. 'It's okay.'

He coughed. His body shuddered, then a violent seizure took hold.

'Jared?' she screamed. 'Jared!' Lena's vision blurred as tears filled her eyes. She put her hands on either side of his face. 'Look at me,' she begged. 'Just look at me.'

Movement. She saw it out of the corner of her eye. The second man was inching toward the bed, trying to reach the gun. Half his body was paralyzed. He dragged himself with one arm, a wounded cockroach leaving a trail of blood.

Lena felt her heart stop. Something had changed. The air had shifted. The world had stopped spinning.

She looked down at her husband.

Jared's body had gone completely slack. His eyelids were closed to a slit. She touched his face, his mouth. Her hand shook so hard that her fingertips tapped against his skin.

Sibyl. Jeffrey. The baby.

Their baby.

Lena stood up.

She moved like a machine. The hammer was still embedded in the first man's face. Lena braced her foot on his forehead, wrapped her hands around the handle, and wrenched the claw loose.

The cockroach was still crawling toward the bed. His pace was slow, his progress incremental. Lena took her time, waiting until he was inches away from the gun to drop her knee into his back. She felt his rib snap under her full weight. Broken teeth spewed from his mouth like chunks of wet sand.

Lena raised the hammer above her head. It came down on his spine with a splintering crack. The man screamed, his arms shooting out, his body bucking underneath her. Lena held on, her mind focused, her body rigid with rage. She raised the hammer high above her head and aimed for the back of his skull, but then – suddenly – everything stopped.

The hammer wouldn't move. It was stuck in the air.

Lena looked behind her. There was a third man. He was tall, with a lanky build and strong hands that kept Lena from delivering the deathblow.

She was too shocked to respond. She knew this man. Knew exactly who he was.

He was dressed like a biker – bandana around his head, chain hanging from his leather belt. He put a finger to his lips, the same as she had done to Jared moments before. There was a warning in his eyes, and underneath the warning, she saw genuine fear.

Suddenly, Lena came back to herself. Her hearing first – the raspy sound of her own labored breathing. Then she felt the shooting pain from her tensed muscles, the singed skin of her palms where she'd grabbed the shotgun. The acrid smell of death flooded her nose. And just underneath that, she caught the tinge of the open road, the familiar odor of exhaust and oil and sweat that Jared brought home with him every night.

Jared.

The back of his shirt was drenched, glued to his skin. The yellow spots of dried paint had disappeared. They were black now, just like his hair – darkened by blood.

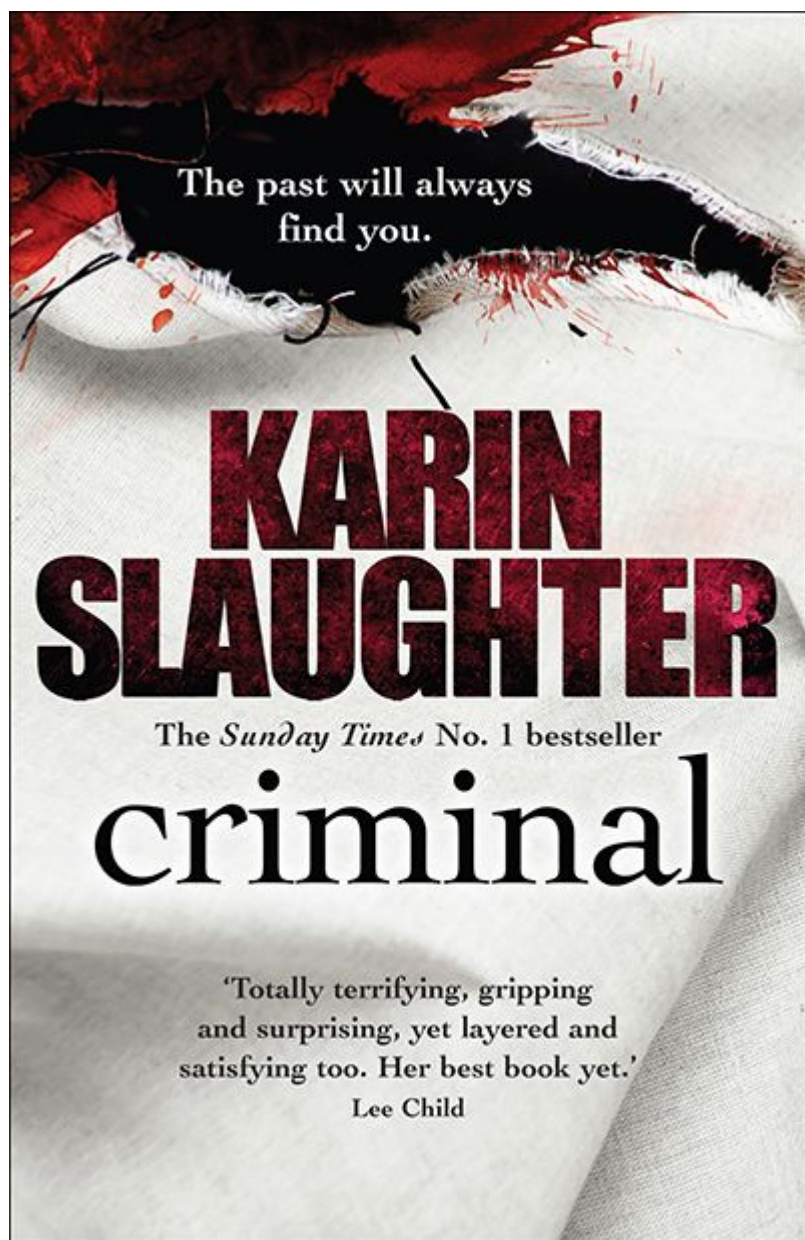
Lena's body went limp. The fight had drained out of her. She lowered the hammer, let it fall to the floor.

Sirens pierced the air. Two, three, more than she could count. A hoarse voice called from somewhere in the house. 'Dude, where you at?'

The sirens got louder. Closer.

Will Trent looked at Lena one last time, then left the room.

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The past will always find you.

A woman is found brutally murdered in a sordid Atlanta apartment.

Her blood-soaked body bears a chilling similarity to a woman found dead almost 40 years earlier.

Soon Special Agent Will Trent finds himself returning to the home he grew up in, and a past that could hold the clue to the killings.

Read on for an extract...

AUGUST 15, 1974

ONE

LUCY BENNETT

A cinnamon brown Oldsmobile Cutlass crawled up Edgewood Avenue, the windows lowered, the driver hunched down in his seat. The lights from the console showed narrow, beady eyes tracing along the line of girls standing under the street sign. Jane. Mary. Lydia. The car stopped. Predictably, the man tilted up his chin toward Kitty. She trotted over, adjusting her miniskirt as she navigated her spiked heels across the uneven asphalt. Two weeks ago, when Juice had first brought Kitty onto the corner, she'd told the other girls she was sixteen, which probably meant fifteen, though she looked no older than twelve.

They had all hated her on sight.

Kitty leaned down into the open window of the car. Her stiff vinyl skirt tipped up like the bottom of a bell. She always got picked first, which was becoming a problem that everyone but Juice could see. Kitty got special favors. She could talk men into doing anything. The girl was fresh, childlike, though like all of them, she carried a kitchen knife in her purse and knew how to use it. Nobody wanted to do what they were doing, but to have another girl – a newer girl – picked over them hurt just as much as if they were all standing on the sidelines at the debutante ball.

Inside the Oldsmobile, the transaction was quickly negotiated, no haggling because what was on offer was still worth the price. Kitty made the signal to Juice, waited for his nod, then got into the car. The muffler chugged exhaust as the Olds made a wide turn onto a narrow side street. The car shook once as the gear was shoved into park. The driver's hand flew up, clamped around the back of Kitty's head, and she disappeared.

Lucy Bennett turned away, looking up the dark, soulless avenue.

No headlights coming. No traffic. No business. Atlanta wasn't a nighttime town. The last person to leave the Equitable building usually turned off the lights, but Lucy could see the bulbs from the Flatiron glowing clear across Central City Park. If she squinted hard enough, she could find the familiar green of the C&S sign that anchored the business district. The New South. Progress through commerce. The City Too Busy to Hate.

If there were men out walking these streets tonight, it was with no amount of good on their minds.

Jane lit a smoke, then tucked the pack back into her purse. She wasn't the kind to share, but she was certainly the kind to take. Her eyes met Lucy's. The dead in them was hard to look at. Jane must've felt the same. She quickly glanced away.

Lucy shivered, even though it was the middle of August, heat wafting off the pavement like smoke from a fire. Her feet were sore. Her back ached. Her head was pounding like a metronome. Her gut felt like she'd swallowed a truckload of concrete. Cotton filled her mouth. Her hands felt the constant prick of pins and needles. A clump of her blonde hair had come out in the sink this morning. She had turned nineteen two days ago and already she was an old woman.

In the side street, the brown Olds shook again. Kitty's head came up. She wiped her mouth as she got out of the car. No dawdling. No giving the john time to reconsider his purchase. The car drove away before she could shut the door, and Kitty teetered for a moment on the high heels, looking lost, afraid, and then angry. They were all angry. Fury was their refuge, their comfort, the only thing that they could truly call their own.

Lucy watched Kitty pick her way back toward the corner. She gave Juice the cash, trying to keep her forward momentum, but he caught her arm to make her stop. Kitty spat on the sidewalk, trying to look like she wasn't terrified as Juice unfolded the wad of cash, counted off each bill. Kitty stood there, waiting. They all waited.

Finally, Juice lifted his chin. The money was good. Kitty took her place back in the line. She didn't look at any of the other girls. She just stared blankly into the street, waiting for the next car to roll up, waiting for the next man who would either give her a nod or pass her by. It'd taken two days, tops, for her eyes to develop the same dead look as the rest of the girls. What was going through her mind? Probably the same as Lucy, that familiar chant that rocked

her to sleep every night: *When-will-this-be-over? When-will-this-be-over? When-will-this-be-over?*

Lucy had been fifteen once. From this distance, she could barely remember that girl. Passing notes in class. Giggling about boys. Rushing home from school every day to watch her soap. Dancing in her room to the Jackson Five with her best friend, Jill Henderson. Lucy was fifteen years old, and then life had opened up like a chasm, and little Lucy had plummeted down, down into the unrelenting darkness.

She had started taking speed to lose weight. Just pills at first. Benzedrine, which her friend Jill had found in her mother's medicine cabinet. They took them sparingly, cautiously, until the feds had gone crazy and banned the pills. The medicine cabinet was empty one day, and the next – or so it seemed – Lucy's weight ballooned back up to well over one hundred fifty pounds. She was the only overweight kid in school save for Fat George, the boy who picked his nose and sat by himself at the lunch table. Lucy hated him the same way he hated her, the same way she hated her own reflection in the mirror.

It was Jill's mother who taught Lucy how to shoot up. Mrs Henderson wasn't stupid; she had noticed the missing pills, been pleased to see Lucy finally doing something to get rid of her baby fat. The woman availed herself of the drug for the same reason. She was a nurse at Clayton General Hospital. She walked out of the emergency room with glass vials of Methedrine chattering like teeth in the pocket of her white uniform. Injectable amphetamine, she told Lucy. The same as the pills, only faster.

Lucy was fifteen years old the first time the needle pierced her skin.

'Just a little bit at a time,' Mrs Henderson coached, drawing a red tinge of blood into the syringe, then slowly pressing home the plunger. 'You control it. Don't let it control you.'

There was no real high, just a lightheadedness, and then of course the welcome loss of appetite. Mrs Henderson was right. The liquid was faster than the pills, easier. Five pounds. Ten pounds. Fifteen. Then – nothing. So Lucy had redefined her 'just a little bit at a time' until she was drawing back not five cc's, but ten, then ten turned to fifteen, then her head exploded and she was on fire.

What did she care about after that?

Nothing.

Boys? Too stupid. Jill Henderson? What a drag. Her weight? Never again.

By the age of sixteen, Lucy was just under a hundred pounds. Her ribs, her hips, her elbows, jutted out like polished marble. For the first time in her life, she had cheekbones. She wore dark Cleopatra eyeliner and blue eye shadow and ironed her long blonde hair so that it slapped stiffly against her impossibly thin ass. The little girl her fifth-grade PE coach had, much to the delight of the rest of the class, nicknamed ‘Steam Roller’ was model-thin, carefree, and – suddenly – popular.

Not popular with her old friends, the ones she had known since kindergarten. They all spurned her as a waste, a dropout, a loser. For once in her life, Lucy didn’t care. Who needed people who looked down on you for having a little fun? Lucy had only ever been a token anyway – the fat girl to pal around with so the other girl could be the pretty one, the charming one, the one all the boys flirted with.

Her new friends thought Lucy was perfect. They loved it when she made a sarcastic quip about someone from her old life. They embraced her weirdness. The girls invited her to their parties. The boys asked her out. They treated her as an equal. She finally fit in with a group. She finally didn’t stick out as *too* anything. She was just one of many. She was just Lucy.

And what of her old life? Lucy felt nothing but disdain for everyone who had inhabited it, especially Mrs Henderson, who abruptly cut her off and said Lucy needed to get her shit together. Lucy’s shit was more together than it had ever been. She had no intention whatsoever of giving up her new life.

All of her old friends were squares, obsessed with college prep, which mostly consisted of debating which sorority they would rush. The finer points of these sororities, whose Victorian and Greek Revival-style mansions dotted Milledge Avenue and South Lumpkin Street at the University of Georgia, had been part of Lucy’s vernacular since the age of ten, but the lure of amphetamine reduced her Greek to a forgotten language. She didn’t need the disapproving glances from her old friends. She didn’t even need Mrs Henderson anymore. There were plenty of new friends who could hook her up, and Lucy’s parents were generous with her allowance. On the weeks she was short, her mother never noticed money missing from her purse.

It was so easy to see now, but at the time, the spiraling down of her life seemed to happen in seconds, not the actual two full years it had taken for Lucy to fall. At home, she was sullen and sulky. She started sneaking out at night and lying to her parents about stupid things. Mundane things. Things that could be easily disproven. At school, Lucy failed class after class, finally ending up in rudimentary English with Fat George sitting in the front and Lucy and her new friends in the back row, mostly sleeping off the lows, biding their time until they could get back to their real love.

The needle.

That finely honed piece of surgical steel, that seemingly innocuous device of delivery that ruled every moment of Lucy's life. She dreamed about shooting up. That first prick of flesh. That pinch as the tip pierced vein. That slow burn as the liquid was injected. That immediate euphoria of the drug entering her system. It was worth everything. Worth every sacrifice. Worth every loss. Worth the things she had to do to get it. Worth the things she all but forgot about the second the drug entered her bloodstream.

Then, suddenly, came the crest of the last hill, the biggest hill, on her roller coaster ride down.

Bobby Fields. Almost twenty years older than Lucy. Wiser. Stronger. He was a mechanic at one of her father's gas stations. Bobby had never noticed her before. Lucy was invisible to him, a pudgy little girl with lank pigtails. But that changed after the needle entered Lucy's life. She walked into the garage one day, her jeans hanging low on her newly lean hips, bell-bottoms frayed from dragging the floor, and Bobby told her to stop and talk awhile.

He listened to her, too, and Lucy only then realized that no one had really listened to her before. And then, Bobby had reached up with his grease-stained fingers and stroked back a piece of hair that was hanging in her face. And then, somehow, they were in the back of the building and his hand was on her breast, and she felt alive under the bright glare of his undivided attention.

Lucy had never been with a man before. Even high as a kite, she knew she should say no. She knew that she had to save herself, that no one wanted spoiled goods. Because as improbable as it now seemed, back then there was still a part of her who assumed that despite the slight detour, one day she'd end up at UGA, pledge herself to whichever house she chose, and get married to an earnest young man whose bright future met with her father's approval.

Lucy would have babies. She would join the PTA. She would bake cookies and drive her kids to school in a station wagon and sit in her kitchen smoking with the other mothers while they complained about their boring lives. And, maybe while the other women discussed marital discord or colicky babies, Lucy would smile pleasantly, remembering her reckless youth, her crazy, hedonistic affair with the needle.

Or, maybe one day she would be on a street corner in the middle of Atlanta and feel her stomach drop at the thought of losing that homey kitchen, those close friends.

Because, while sixteen-year-old Lucy had never been with a man before, Bobby Fields had been with plenty of women. Plenty of young women. He knew how to talk to them. He knew how to make them feel special. And, most important, he knew how to move his hand from breast to thigh, from thigh to crotch, and from there to other places that made Lucy gasp so loudly that her father called from the office to see if she was okay.

'I'm all right, Daddy,' she had said, because Bobby's hand had felt so good that Lucy would've lied to God Himself.

At first, their relationship was a secret, which of course made it more exciting. They had a bond. They had a forbidden thing between them. For nearly a full year, they carried on their clandestine affair. Lucy would avoid Bobby's gaze when she made her weekly trek to the garage to count quarters with her daddy. She would pretend Bobby didn't exist until she couldn't take it anymore. She would go to the dirty bathroom behind the building. He would grip his greasy hands so hard around her ass that she would feel the pain when she sat back down beside her father.

The hunger for Bobby was almost as intense as her hunger for the needle. She skipped school. She fabricated a part-time job and fake sleepovers that her parents never bothered to verify. Bobby had his own place. He drove a Mustang Fastback like Steve McQueen. He drank beer and he smoked dope and he scored speed for Lucy and she learned how to go down on him without gagging.

It was all perfect until she realized that she couldn't keep up her fake life anymore. Or maybe she just didn't want to. She dropped out of high school two months before graduation. The final straw came the weekend her parents took a trip to visit her brother in college. Lucy spent the entire time at Bobby's. She cooked for him. She cleaned for him. She made love to him all night, and during the

day she stared at the clock, counting down the minutes until she could tell him that she loved him. And Lucy *did* love him, especially when he got home at night with a big grin on his face and a little vial of magic in his pocket.

Bobby was generous with the needle. Maybe too generous. He got Lucy so high that her teeth started chattering. She was still high when she stumbled home the next morning.

Sunday.

Her parents were supposed to go to church with her brother before driving back, but there they were, sitting at the kitchen table, still in their traveling clothes. Her mother hadn't even taken off her hat. They had been waiting up all night. They had called her friend, her alibi, who was supposed to say that Lucy had spent the night. The girl had lied at first but after only the slightest bit of pressure told Lucy's parents exactly where their daughter was and exactly what she'd been up to for the last several months.

Lucy was seventeen by then, still considered a child. Her parents tried to have her committed. They tried to have Bobby arrested. They tried to prevent other garages from hiring him, but he just moved to Atlanta, where no one cared who fixed their car so long as it was cheap.

Two months of hell passed, and then, suddenly, Lucy was eighteen. Just like that, her life was different. Or different in a different way. Old enough to quit school. Old enough to drink. Old enough to leave her family without the pigs dragging her back home. She went from being her daddy's girl to Bobby's girl, living in an apartment off Stewart Avenue, sleeping all day, waiting for Bobby to come home at night so he could shoot her up, screw her, then let her sleep some more.

The only regret Lucy felt at the time was toward her brother, Henry. He was in law school at UGA. He was six years older, more like a friend than a sibling. In person, they generally shared long moments of silence, but since he'd gone away to school, they had written each other letters two or three times a month.

Lucy had loved writing letters to Henry. She was the old Lucy in all of her correspondences: silly about boys, anxious for graduation, eager to learn how to drive. No talk of the needle. No talk of her new friends who were so far outside the margins of society that Lucy was afraid to bring them home lest they steal her mother's good silver. That is, if her mother even let them through the door.

Henry's responses were always brief, but even when he was covered up in exams, he managed to send Lucy a line or two to let her know what was going on. He was excited about her joining him on campus. He was excited about showing around his baby girl to his friends. He was excited about everything, until he wasn't, because her parents told him that his darling sister had moved to Atlanta as the whore of a thirty-eight-year-old hippie, drug-dealing gear-head.

After that, Lucy's letters came back unopened. Henry's scrawl informed her, 'Return to sender.' Just like that, he dropped Lucy like trash in the street.

Maybe she *was* trash. Maybe she deserved to be abandoned. Because once the rush wore off, once the highs turned less intense and the lows became almost unbearable, what was there left to Lucy Bennett but a life on the street?

Two months after Bobby moved her to Atlanta, he kicked her out. Who could blame him? His hot young fox had turned into a junkie who met him at the door every night begging for the needle. And when Bobby stopped supplying her, she found another man in the complex who was willing to give her anything she wanted. So what if she had to spread her legs for it? He was giving her what Bobby wouldn't. He was supplying her demand.

His name was Fred. He cleaned planes at the airport. He liked to do things to Lucy that made her cry, and then he'd give her the needle and everything would be okay again. Fred thought he was special, better than Bobby. When Fred figured out the gleam in Lucy's eye was for the drug and not for him, he started beating her. He didn't stop beating her until she landed in the hospital. And then when she got a taxi back to the apartment complex, the manager told her that Fred had moved out, no forwarding address. And then the manager told Lucy that she was welcome to stay with him.

Much of what came next was a blur, or maybe it was so clear that she couldn't see it, the way putting on someone else's glasses makes your eyes cross. For almost a year, Lucy went from man to man, supplier to supplier. She did things – horrible things – to get the needle. If there was a totem pole in the world of speed, she had started at the top and quickly hit bottom. Day after day, she felt the dizzying spin of her life circling the drain. Yet, she felt helpless to stop it. The pain would kick in. The need. The yearning. The longing that burned like hot acid in her gut.

And then finally, the very bottom. Lucy was terrified of the bikers who sold speed, but eventually, inevitably, her love of the speed won out. They tossed her around like a baseball, everyone taking a hit. All of them had fought in Vietnam and were furious at the world, the system. Furious at Lucy, too. She had never overdosed before, at least not bad enough to end up in the hospital. Once, twice, a third time, she was dropped off the back of a Harley in front of the Grady emergency room. The bikers didn't like that. Hospitals brought the cops and the cops were expensive to buy off. One night, Lucy got too high and one of them brought her down with heroin, a trick he'd picked up fighting Charlie.

Heroin, the final nail in Lucy's coffin. As with the speed, she was a quick convert. That deadening sensation. That indescribable bliss. The loss of time. Space. Consciousness.

Lucy had never taken money for sex. Her transactions until this point had always had an air of bartering. Sex for speed. Sex for heroin. Never sex for money.

But now, Lucy found herself in desperate need of money.

The bikers sold speed, not heroin. Heroin belonged to the coloreds. Even the Mafia was hands-off. It was a ghetto drug. It was too potent, too addictive, too dangerous for white people. Especially white women.

Which is how Lucy ended up being tricked out by a black man with a tattoo of Jesus on his chest.

The spoon. The flame. The smell of burning rubber. The tourniquet. The filter from a broken cigarette. There was a romantic pageantry to the whole thing, a drawn-out process that made her former affair with the needle seem woefully unsophisticated. Even now, Lucy could feel herself getting excited at the thought of the spoon. She closed her eyes, imagining the bent piece of silver, the way the neck resembled a broken swan. Black swan. Black sheep. Black man's whore.

Suddenly, Juice was at her side. The other girls cautiously moved away. Juice had a way of sensing weakness. It was how he got them in the first place. 'What it is, Sexy?'

'Nothing,' she mumbled. 'Everything's dyn-o-mite.'

He took the toothpick out of his mouth. 'Don't play me, gal.'

Lucy looked down at the ground. She could see his white patent leather shoes, the way the bell-bottom of his custom-made green pants draped across the wingtips. How many strangers had she

screwed to put the shine on those shoes? How many back seats had she lain down in so he could go to the tailor in Five Points to have his inseam measured?

‘Sorry.’ She chanced a look at his face, trying to gauge his temper.

Juice took out his handkerchief and rubbed the sweat off his forehead. He had long sideburns that connected to his mustache and goatee. There was a birthmark on his cheek that Lucy stared at sometimes when she needed to concentrate on other things.

He said, ‘Come on, gal. You don’t tell me what’s on your mind, I cain’t fix it.’ He pushed her shoulder. When she didn’t start talking, he pushed her harder to get the point across. He wasn’t going away. Juice hated when they kept secrets from him.

‘I was thinking about my mother,’ Lucy told him, which was the first time she’d told a man the truth in a long while.

Juice laughed, used the toothpick to address the other girls. ‘Ain’t that sweet? She been thinkin’ about her mammy.’ He raised his voice. ‘How many’a y’all’s mama’s here for ya now?’

There was a titter of nervous laughter. Kitty, ever the suck-up, said, ‘We just need you, Juice. Only you.’

‘Lucy,’ Mary whispered. The word nearly got trapped in her throat. If Juice got pissed off, none of them would get what they wanted, and all that they wanted right now, all that they needed, was the spoon and the H that Juice had in his pocket.

‘Nah, it’s all right.’ Juice waved off Mary. ‘Let her talk. Come on, girl. Speak.’

Maybe it was because he said the same thing that you’d say to a dog – ‘speak,’ like Lucy would get a treat if she barked on command – or maybe it was because she was so used to doing exactly what Juice told her to do, that Lucy’s mouth started moving of its own volition.

‘I was thinkin’ about this time my mama took me into town.’ Lucy closed her eyes. She could feel herself back in the car. See the metal dashboard of her mother’s Chrysler gleaming in the bright sunlight. It was hot, steamy, the sort of August that made you wish you had air-conditioning in your car. ‘She was gonna drop me off at the library while she did her chores.’

Juice chuckled at her memory. ‘Aw, that’s sweet, girl. Your mama takin’ you to the liberry sose you can read.’

‘She couldn’t get there.’ Lucy opened her eyes, looked directly at Juice in a way she’d never before dared. ‘The Klan was having a

rally.'

Juice cleared his throat. He cut his eyes to the other girls, then zeroed back in on Lucy. 'Keep going.' His deep tone wedged a splinter of cold into her spine.

'The streets were blocked. They were stopping traffic, checking cars.'

'Hush now,' Mary whispered, begging for Lucy to stop. But Lucy couldn't stop. Her master had told her to speak.

'It was a Saturday. Mama always took me to the library on Saturdays.'

'That right?' Juice asked.

'Yes.' Even with her eyes open, Lucy could still see the scene playing out in her head. She was in her mother's car. Safe. Carefree. Before the pills. Before the needle. Before the heroin. Before Juice. Before she lost that little Lucy who sat so patiently in her mother's car, worried that she wasn't going to get to the library in time for her reading group.

Little Lucy was a voracious reader. She gripped the stack of books in her lap as she stared at the men blocking the streets. They were all dressed in their white robes. Most of them had their hoods pulled back because of the heat. She recognized some from church, a couple from school. She waved at Mr Sheffield, who owned the hardware store. He winked at her and waved back.

Lucy told Juice, 'We were on a hill near the courthouse, and there was a black guy in front of us, stopped at the stop sign. He was in one of those little foreign cars. Mr Peterson walked right up to him, and Mr Laramie was on the other side.'

'That right?' Juice repeated.

'Yes, that's right. The guy was terrified. His car kept rolling back. He must've had a clutch. His foot was slipping because he was so panicked. And I remember my mama watching him like we were watching *Wild Kingdom* or something, and she just laughed and laughed, and said, "Lookit how scared that coon is." '

'Jesus,' Mary hissed.

Lucy smiled at Juice, repeated, 'Lookit how scared that coon is.'

Juice took the toothpick out of his mouth. 'You best watch yourself, gal.'

'Lookit how scared that coon is,' Lucy mumbled. 'Lookit how scared ...' She let her voice trail off, but it was only like an engine idling before it was gunned. For no reason, the story struck her as

hilariously funny. Her voice went up, the sound echoing off the buildings. 'Lookit how scared that coon is! Lookit how scared that coon is!'

Juice slapped her, open palm, but hard enough to spin her around. Lucy felt blood slide down her throat.

Not the first time she'd been hit. Not the last. It wouldn't stop her. Nothing could stop her. 'Lookit how scared that coon is! Lookit how scared that coon is!'

'Shut up!' Juice punched his fist into her face.

Lucy felt the crack of a tooth breaking. Her jaw twisted like a Hula Hoop, but she still said, 'Lookit how scared—'

He kicked her in the stomach, his tight pants keeping his foot low so that she felt the toe of his shoe scrape her pelvic bone. Lucy gasped from the pain, which was excruciating, but somehow liberating. How many years had it been since she'd felt something other than numb? How many years had it been since she'd raised her voice, told a man no?

Her throat felt tight. She could barely stand. 'Lookit how scared that—'

Juice punched her in the face again. She felt the bridge of her nose splinter. Lucy staggered back, arms open. She saw stars. Literal stars. Her purse dropped. The heel of her shoe snapped off.

'Get out my face!' Juice waved his fist in the air. 'Get outta here 'fore I kill you, bitch!'

Lucy stumbled into Jane, who pushed her away like a diseased dog.

'Just go!' Mary begged. 'Please.'

Lucy swallowed a mouthful of blood and coughed it back out. Pieces of white speckled the ground. Teeth.

'Get on, bitch!' Juice warned her. 'Get on outta my sight.'

Lucy managed to turn. She looked up the dark street. There were no lights showing the way. Either the pimps shot them out or the city didn't bother to turn them on. Lucy stumbled again, but kept herself upright. The broken heel was a problem. She kicked off both shoes. The soles of her feet felt the intense heat of the asphalt, a burning sensation that shot straight up to her scalp. It was like walking on hot coals. She'd seen that on TV once – the trick was to walk fast enough to deprive the heat of oxygen so your skin didn't burn.

Lucy picked up her pace. She straightened herself as she walked.

She kept her head held high despite the breathtaking pain in her ribs. It didn't matter. The darkness didn't matter. The heat in her soles didn't matter. Nothing mattered.

She turned, screaming, 'Look at how scared that coon is!'

Juice made to run after her, and Lucy bolted down the street. Her bare feet slapped against the pavement. Her arms pumped. Her lungs shook as she rounded the corner. Adrenaline raced through her body. Lucy thought of all those PE classes in school, when her bad attitude had earned her five, ten, twenty laps around the track. She had been so fast then, so young and free. Not anymore. Her legs started to cramp. Her knees wanted to buckle. Lucy chanced a look behind her, but Juice was not there. No one was there. She stumbled to a stop.

He didn't even care enough to chase her.

Lucy bent over, bracing her hand against a phone booth, blood dripping from her mouth. She used her tongue to find the source. Two teeth were broken, though thank God they were in the back.

She went inside the booth. The light was too bright when she closed the door. She let it hang open and leaned against the glass. Her breath was still labored. Her body felt as if she'd run ten miles, not a handful of blocks.

She looked at the phone, the black receiver on the hook, the slot for the dime. Lucy traced her fingers along the bell symbol engraved in the metal plate, then let her hand move down to find the four, the seven, the eight. Her parents' phone number. She still knew it by heart, just like she knew the street number where they lived, her grandmother's birthday, her brother's upcoming graduation date. That earlier Lucy was not completely lost. There still existed her life in numbers.

She could call, but even if they answered, no one would have anything to say.

Lucy pushed herself out of the phone booth. She walked slowly up the street, in no particular direction but away. Her stomach clenched as the first wave of withdrawal made itself known. She should go to the hospital to get patched up and beg the nurse for some methadone before it got really bad. Grady was twelve blocks down and three over. Her legs weren't cramping yet. She could make the walk. Those laps around the high school track hadn't always felt like a punishment. Lucy used to love to run. She loved jogging on weekends with her brother Henry. He always gave up

before she did. Lucy had a letter from him in her purse. She'd gotten it last month from the man at the Union Mission, where the girls took their downtime when Juice was mad at them.

Lucy had kept the letter for three whole days before opening it, afraid it would be bad news. Her father dead. Her mother run off with the Charles Chips man. Everyone was getting divorced now, weren't they? Broken homes. Broken children. Though Lucy had been broken for a long time, so it was nothing to open and read a simple letter, right?

Henry's cramped script was so familiar that it felt like a soft hand on her cheek. Tears had filled her eyes. She read the letter through once, then again, then again. One page. No gossip or family news, because Henry was not that way. He was precise, logical, never dramatic. Henry was in his last year of law school. He was looking for a job now because he'd heard the market was tough. He would miss being a student. He would miss being around his friends. And he really missed Lucy.

He missed Lucy.

This was the part she had read four times, then five, then so many more that she had lost count. Henry missed Lucy. Her brother missed his sister.

Lucy missed herself, too.

But Lucy had dropped her purse back on the street corner. Juice probably had it now. He'd probably shaken it out onto the sidewalk and combed through everything like it belonged to him. Which meant he had Henry's letter and Lucy's kitchen knife that was sharp enough to cut the skin on her leg, which she knew because she had done it last week just to make sure she could still bleed.

Lucy took a left at the next corner. She turned around to look at the moon. It punctured the black sky with the curved edge of its fingernail. The skeleton of the unfinished Peachtree Plaza hotel loomed in the distance – the tallest hotel in the world. The whole city was under construction. In a year or two, there would be thousands of new hotel rooms opening downtown. Business would be booming, especially in the streets.

She doubted she'd live to see it.

Lucy tripped again. Pain shot up her spine. The damage to her body was making itself known. Her rib must be fractured. She knew that her nose was broken. The clenching in her stomach was getting worse. She would need a fix soon or she'd go into the DTs.

She made herself put one foot in front of the other. 'Please,' she prayed to the God of Grady Hospital. 'Let them give me methadone. Let them give me a bed. Let them be kind. Let them be—'

Lucy stopped. What the hell was wrong with her? Why was she leaving her fate to some bitch nurse who would take one look at her and know exactly what she was? Lucy should go back to her strip. She should make up with Juice. She should get down on her hands and knees and beg him for forgiveness. For mercy. For a hit. For salvation.

'Good evening, sister.'

Lucy spun around, half expecting to see Henry, though he had never greeted her that way. There was a man standing a few feet behind her. White. Tall. Covered in shadow. Lucy's hand flew to her chest. Her heart pounded underneath her palm. She knew better than to let some john sneak up on her like that. She reached for her purse, the knife she kept inside, but too late remembered that she'd lost everything.

'Are you all right?' the man asked. He was clean-cut, something Lucy hadn't seen in a long while, except on a pig. His light brown hair was shaved into a buzz cut. Sideburns short. No shadow of a beard even this late at night. Military, she guessed. Lots of guys were coming home from Nam. In six months, this asshole would be just like all the other vets Lucy knew, wearing his dirty hair in a braid, beating down some woman and talking shit about the Man.

Lucy tried to make her voice strong. 'Sorry, handsome. I'm done for the night.' Her words echoed in the cavern formed by the tall buildings. She was aware that she was slurring, and straightened her shoulders so he wouldn't think she was an easy target. 'Closed for business.'

'I'm not looking for business.' He took a step forward. He had a book in his hands. The Bible.

'Shit,' she mumbled. These guys were everywhere. Mormons, Jehovah's Witnesses, even some of the freaks from the local Catholic church. 'Lookit, I don't need saving.'

'I hate to argue, sister, but you look like you do.'

'I'm not your sister. I have a brother, and you're not him.' Lucy turned around and started walking. She couldn't go back to Juice right now. Lucy didn't think she could stand another beating. She would go to the hospital and make such a stink that they'd have to sedate her. That, at least, would get her through the night.

‘I bet he’s worried about you.’

Lucy kept walking.

‘Your brother?’ the man asked. ‘I bet he’s worried about you. I know I’d be.’

She clutched her hands together, but didn’t turn around. Footsteps followed her. Lucy didn’t quicken her pace. Couldn’t quicken her pace. The pain in her stomach was strong, a knife cutting through her viscera. The hospital was fine for one night, but there was tomorrow, and the next day, and the next. Lucy would have to find a way back into Juice’s good graces. Tonight had been slow. Even Kitty wasn’t bringing in much. Juice was all about cold, hard cash, and Lucy was betting this Jesus freak had at least ten bucks on him. Sure, Juice would still beat her, but the money would soften his blows.

‘I want to call him.’ Lucy kept a careful pace. She could hear the man following, keeping his distance. ‘My brother. He’ll come get me. He said he would.’ She was lying, but her voice was strong. ‘I don’t have any money. To call him, that is.’

‘If it’s money you want, I can give you that.’

Lucy stopped. Slowly, she turned around. The man was standing in a sliver of light that came from the lobby of a nearby office building. Lucy was too tall, five-ten with her shoes off. She was used to looking down at most people. This guy was well over six feet. The hands that held the Bible were huge. His shoulders were broad. Long legs, but not lean. Lucy was fast, especially when she was scared. The minute he took out his wallet, she would grab it and dash away.

She asked, ‘You a marine or what?’

‘4-F.’ He took a step toward her. ‘Medical disability.’

He looked capable enough to Lucy. He probably had a daddy who bought him out of the draft, same as Lucy’s dad had with Henry. ‘Give me some money so I can call my brother.’ She remembered, ‘Please.’

‘Where is he?’

‘Athens.’

‘Greece?’

She sputtered a laugh. ‘Georgia. He’s in college. Law school. He’s about to get married. I wanna call him. Congratulate him.’ She added, ‘Get him to pick me up and take me home. To my family. Where I belong.’

The man took another step forward. The light picked out the features of his face, which were normal, even average. Blue eyes. Nice mouth. Sharp nose. Square jaw. 'Why aren't you in college?'

Lucy felt a tingle at the back of her neck. She wasn't sure how to describe it. Part of her was afraid of the man. Part of her was thinking she hadn't talked to a guy like this in more years than she could remember. He wasn't looking at her like she was a whore. He wasn't proposing a transaction. There was nothing in his eyes that told her he was a threat. And yet, it was two in the morning and he was standing in the empty street of a city that pretty much closed its doors at six o'clock after all the white people went back to the suburbs.

The truth was, neither one of them belonged here.

'Sister.' He took another step closer. Lucy was shocked to see the concern in his eyes. 'I don't want you to be afraid of me. I let the Lord guide my hand.'

Lucy had trouble answering. Years had passed since anyone had looked at her with anything close to compassion. 'What makes you think I'm afraid?'

'I think you've lived with fear for a long time, Lucy.'

'You don't know what I've—' She stopped. 'How do you know my name?'

He seemed confused. 'You told me.'

'No, I didn't.'

'You told me your name was Lucy. Just a few minutes ago.' He held up the Bible for emphasis. 'I swear.'

All the saliva in her mouth was gone. Her name was her secret. She never gave it away to strangers. 'No, I didn't.'

'Lucy ...' He was less than five feet away from her now. There was that same concerned look in his eyes, though he could easily take one more step and wrap both hands around her neck before she knew what was happening.

But he didn't. He just stood there holding his Bible to his chest. 'Please, don't be scared of me. You have no reason to be afraid.'

'Why are you here?'

'I want to help you. To save you.'

'I don't need saving. I need money.'

'I told you I'd give you all the money you need.' He tucked the Bible under his arm and took out his wallet. She could see bills stacked neatly in the fold. Hundreds. He fanned them out in his

hand. 'I want to take care of you. That's all I've ever wanted.'

Her chest shook. She eyed the money. There was at least five hundred there, possibly more. 'I don't know you.'

'No, not yet.'

Lucy's foot stepped back, but she needed to go forward, needed to grab the cash and run. If the man sensed her plans, he didn't show it. He stood there with the hundreds looking like postage stamps in his large hands, not moving, not speaking. All that cash. Five hundred dollars. She could rent a hotel room, keep herself off the street for months, maybe a year.

Lucy felt her heart banging against her shattered rib. She was torn between snatching the dough and running for her life and just plain running *from* her life. The hair on the back of her neck stood at attention. Her hands were shaking. She felt heat radiating somewhere behind her. For a moment, Lucy assumed the sun was coming up over Peachtree Plaza, streaking down the street, warming her neck and shoulders. Was this some sign from above? Was this finally her moment of salvation?

No. No salvation. Just money.

She forced herself to take a step forward. Then another. 'I want to know you,' she told the man, fear making the words slur on her tongue.

He smiled. 'That's good, sister.'

Lucy made herself return the smile. Made her shoulders curve so she looked younger, sweeter, innocent. And then she grabbed the wad of cash. She turned to run, but her body jerked back like a slingshot.

'Don't fight me.' His fingers were clamped around her wrist. Half her arm disappeared inside his grip. 'You can't escape.'

Lucy stopped fighting. She didn't have a choice. Pain was shooting up her neck. Her head was throbbing. Her shoulder crunched in the socket. Still, she kept her fist wrapped around the money. She could feel the stiff bills scraping against her palm.

He said, 'Sister, why do you crave a life of sin?'

'I don't know.' Lucy shook her head. She looked down at the ground. She sniffed back the blood that dripped from her nose. And then she felt his grip start to loosen.

'Sister—'

Lucy wrenched away her arm, her skin feeling torn, like a glove ripping off. She ran as fast and as hard as she could, feet slapping

pavement, arms pumping. One block. Two. She opened her mouth, taking deep gulps of air that sent stabbing pains into her chest. Broken ribs. Busted nose. Shattered teeth. Money in her hand. Five hundred dollars. A hotel room. A bus ticket. Safety. All the H that she could handle. She was free. Goddamn it, she was finally free.

Until her head flew back. Her scalp felt like the teeth of a zipper being wrenched apart as chunks of hair were snatched out at the root. Lucy's forward momentum didn't stop. She saw her legs shoot out in front of her, feet level to her chin, and then her back slammed down flat to the ground.

'Don't fight,' the man repeated, straddling her, his hands wrapping around her neck.

Lucy clawed at his fingers. His grip was relentless. Blood poured from her torn scalp. It went into her eyes, her nose, her mouth.

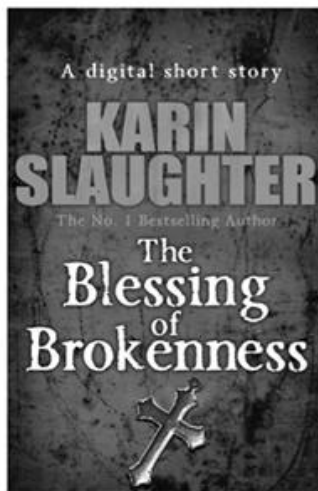
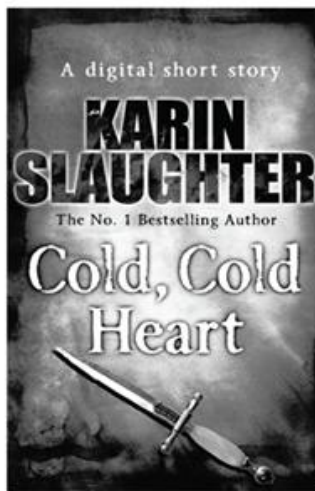
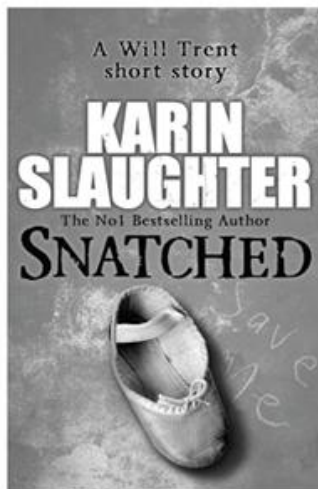
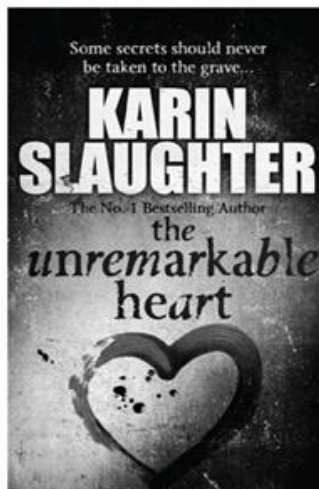
She couldn't scream. She blindly reached out, trying to dig her fingernails into his eye sockets. She felt the side of his face, his rough skin, then her hands dropped because she couldn't hold up her arms anymore. His breath quickened as her body spasmed. Warm urine ran down her leg. She could feel his excitement even as a sense of hopelessness took over. Who was Lucy fighting for? Who cared if Lucy Bennett lived or died? Maybe Henry would be sad when he heard the news, but her parents, her old friends, even Mrs Henderson, would probably feel nothing but relief.

Finally, the inevitable.

Lucy's tongue swelled in her mouth. Her vision blurred. It was useless. There was no air left for her lungs. No oxygen going to her brain. She felt herself start to give, her muscles releasing. The back of her head hit pavement. She stared up. The sky was impossibly black, pinholes of stars barely visible. The man stared down at her, the same concerned look in his eyes.

Only this time, he was smiling.

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